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ON THE COVER

La dolce vita on the sweet trails of Finale as explored by Sim Mainey on page 58. Photographer: Dan Milner



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Roll on 2016

What are your mountain biking highlights of the year gone by?

Well, that went quickly. The December issue is here again, which means 2015 is almost over. How was it for you? Turn to page 18 for our round-up of the best rides, bikes and gear of the year just gone, and see if you agree with our highlights.

It's been another year of innovation in technology, whether that's Plus-sized wheels or bump-softening 'soft-tails'. These leaps forward in mtb gear are always great to see, but let's face it — life is about riding, not spec sheets or performance data. That's why, for me, the highlights of **mbr**'s year have been the stories and the pictures we've published in our big features. Most of all, I've enjoyed reading the trail centre articles from our team of journalists around the UK. From the outside, the groomed trails and signposts can make these places seem soulless, but when you scratch the surface, there's more to trail centres than meets the eye. They're buzzing, thriving communities in themselves, often born out of a labour of love and each with their own personality and ethos. This month is no exception — turn to page 68 for a great read on Scotland's Mabie Forest. Enjoy...

finan
Editor, **mbr**



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Turn to page 56

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Model shown Jeep Renegade 1.4 MultiAir II 140 hp Longitude ZWD Manual at £20,295 including Special Pastel Paint at £500. OFFICIAL FUEL CONSUMPTION FIGURES FOR JEEP RENEGADE RANGE MPG (L/100KM): EXTRA URBAN 47.9 (5.9) – 70.6 (4.0), URBAN 32.5 (8.7) – 51.4 (5.5), COMBINED 40.9 (6.9) – 61.4 (4.6). CO₂ EMISSIONS: 160 – 120 G/KM. Fuel consumption and CO₂ figures are obtained for comparative purposes in accordance with EC directives/regulations and may not be representative of real-life driving conditions. Factors such as driving style, weather and road conditions may also have a significant effect on fuel consumption. *Customer deposit is £5,046. Optional Final Payment is £9,672. Contract Term is 24 months. Promotion available on new Renegade 1.4 MultiAir II 140 hp Longitude with Special Pastel paint registered by 30th September 2015. Jeep Deposit Contribution only available in conjunction with Jeep Horizon PCP. With Jeep Horizon you have the option to return the vehicle and not pay the final payment, subject to the vehicle not having exceeded an agreed annual mileage (a charge of 6p per mile for exceeding 10,000 miles per annum in this example) and being in good condition. Finance subject to status. Guarantees may be required. Terms and Conditions apply. At participating Dealers only. Jeep Financial Services, PO Box 4465, Slough, SL1 0RW. Jeep® is a registered trademark of FCA US LLC.





Big picture

With the race season in full flow, and events every weekend, sometimes you just need an escape from the circus. Torridon is just that; far enough to get away from it all and question if you're still in the UK but close enough you can be hurtling down Glencoe heading for the motorway within a few hours. It's all too easy to forget these moments — this winter we should all make the effort to get out into the wilderness and enjoy riding with friends. That's why we do it, after all!

Sam Flanagan





Big picture

Watching the sun come up from the top of a hill is something that all mountain bikers should experience at least once in their lives. The only problem is, that you're taking a big risk. It's dark when you leave the warmth of your bed, and as such there is no way of being sure of what weather conditions await you. Only when you climb out of the clouds, to be greeted by a clear sky and stars all around, do you know you're in for something special.

James Vincent





Big picture

Just before sunset, during mid-winter and Kohei Yamamoto (Trek Factory Racing's Japanese XCO Champion) rides down from Phu Chi Fan, a remote mountain which stands above the Mekong River in the Chiang Rai province of northern Thailand, overlooking Laos. Many leading Asian riders, including Yamamoto, spend the winter here, where it hardly rains and shorts are worn with pride on a daily basis.

Steve Thomas

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“AT A SECTION OF FAST TRAIL WE STOP AGAIN TO LOOK AT CAKE MIX. YES, CAKE MIX”

Edited by Jamie Darlow

GEAR

RIDES

FAST & FIT

INSPIRATION

GET STARTED

Getting our fill at Mable, page 74

PLUS NET GAIN

Scott's new Plus size Genius — niche concept bike or the next bike thing?

Scott is into the new Plus size wheel standard in a big way, with 11 different models and a raft of new technologies to make it all work. The Plus idea is to use wider tyres to give you more grip at lower pressures than regular rubber.

The Genius 700 Tuned Plus here uses 2.8in Schwalbe Nobby Nic tyres, which it reckons increases the size of the contact patch by 21 per cent compared to a 2.35in Nobby. A bigger contact patch means more rubber in contact with the trail and therefore more grip. Amazingly then, Schwalbe thinks there's just a one per cent increase in rolling resistance from this approach, and an enviable eight per cent increase in snake bite protection too.

The big question then, given its £6,099 price tag that puts it in 'main bike' territory, is whether you'd have one over a regular wheeler? Time will tell.

Scott's TwinLoc suspension — toggle between 130mm travel, 90mm and full lockout on the rear; and simultaneously 140mm-100mm-lockout from the Fox Float 34

27.5 Plus tyres the frame can also take regular-width 29er wheels and tyres too

Wide hub standard: Boost 148mm on the back end, and 110mm fork hub for more tyre clearance and stiffer wheels

HMX carbon front triangle and alloy back end, with Scott's new IDS-SL dropout

SRAM XO1 1x11 drivetrain

Chainline has been pushed out by 3mm to fit round the bulbous tyres, but the Q-factor remains unchanged



The Buzz

REVIEW OF THE YEAR

The best bikes, the hottest gear and the prime riding spots from the last 12 months

THE RIDES

British trail hubs, American slick rock and Slovenian mineshafts have made for an awesome 2015

In 2015 we've been all over the planet to bring you the best singletrack in the world, from a 20-minute downhill flow trail in

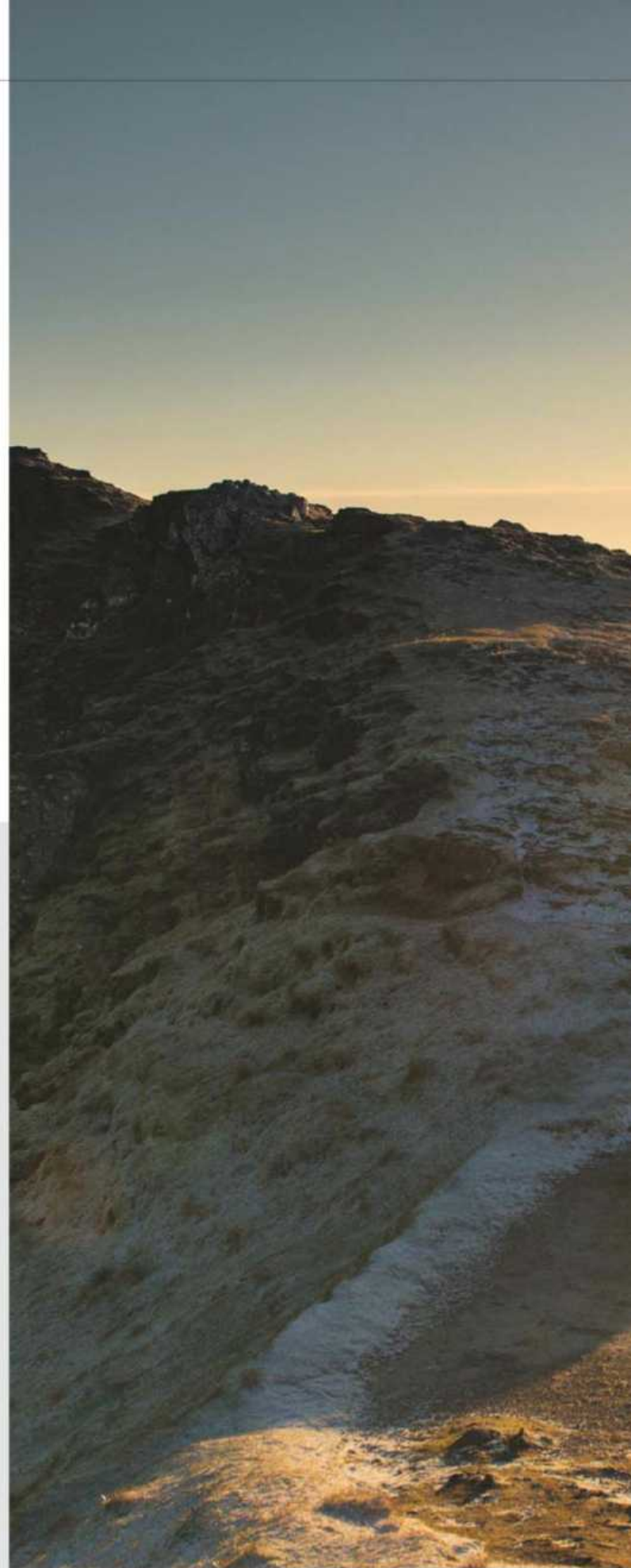


Austria to slick rock riding in Utah and hike-a-biking in the Highlands.

This year we've also been riding the UK's best trail centres, sampling the newest, oldest and quirkiest man-made trail hubs in the country. We began at the beginning with Coed y Brenin, which was the UK's first trail centre when it opened back in the 90s. We retraced the footsteps of our first visit and discovered how Coed y Brenin has changed since then, and how the creation of enduro trails and rocky McMoab-style lines will open a new chapter in its long history.

SLOVENIA

Not many of us had thought of riding in Slovenia, until **mbr** photographer Roo Fowler headed there this summer to discover an Alpine wonderland that really does have it all. We're talking natural loamy mountain trails, underground mineshaft singletrack (yes, really) and Europe's longest flow trail just across the border in Austria: 20 minutes of bliss.





BEN LOMOND

Ben Lomond proved to be one of our favourite natural rides of the year, and certainly the most dramatic. It's the most popular Munro, meaning you have to get up early to beat the trail traffic if you want to ride it clean — but the spectacular sunrise will make getting up at silly o'clock all the more worth it. Then you get the descent: 30 minutes of bedrock to dance over, waterbars to bunnyhop and switchbacks to flick round. Bliss.

THE BIKES

Plus-size wheels came out of nowhere, softtail hardtails made a comeback, and a camping and walking shop made the year's best bike...

CALIBRE BOSSNUT

Not heard of Calibre? Neither had we until this year, because it's the own-brand of Go Outdoors, a camping, walking and outdoorsy retailer. Amazingly then, it has managed to create the best £1,000 full-suspension bike we've ever ridden: it's the first bike at this price we've ever been able to turn up to any trail on and genuinely ride at full

gas, rather than just hanging on for survival. That's because the spec is amazing: RockShox Sektor fork and Monarch shock, Shimano drivetrain, brakes and wheels and even great WTB tyres. More importantly, though, the way this bike rides is spot-on, it's solid and stiff, predictable in every situation and makes you feel fast and confident.

So what does this mean for the big brands? They should be quaking in their boots — out of nowhere a relatively unknown brand has designed a bike with incredible attention to detail and blown the tried and tested competition out of the water.

gooutdoors.co.uk

PLUS BIKES

Fat bikes aren't everyone's cup of tea, but Plus-sized bikes really showed us they could deliver something different. The concept is that our standard wheel sizes (650b and 29in) grow outwards to allow for wider tyres, anything up to 3in. This inevitably makes the wheel taller too, but crucially it opens up a whole new world of grip and low-psi riding. Most manufacturers have a Plus bike of some sort now — in last month's test we were fans of the Specialized Stumpjumper FSR Comp 6Fattie.



HARDTAILS GALORE

The hardtail proved it's here to stay in 2015. First there was BMC's Teamelite, with a seatstay elastomer damper, meaning the back end of the bike flexed as you rode. Then there was the Trek Procaliber, with its flexy seat tube dishing out 11mm of movement. And finally the Trek Stache 9 29+ came along with Plus-sized tyres and dialled geometry. Add those newbies to the amazing Whyte 901 and there's every reason to believe the hardtail is as relevant today as it was in the 80s.





THE GEAR

When Shimano and Fox fought back against SRAM

XT GROUPSET

SRAM got the jump on its rivals when it launched its 1x11 drivetrain in 2012, but this year Shimano hit back with a groupset that looks set to become our new favourite: XT 2016. XT is now 11-speed and you can run it with a single, double or a triple chainset, but the really big news is the choice of two XT cassettes. There's an 11-40t similar to

the current XTR, and a new, wider-range 11-42t, making XT as versatile as SRAM.

There is a range of other improvements over old XT too. Shimano's Dynamic Chain Engagement design has trickled down from top-end XTR, and uses a hooked leading edge on the cassette and chainring teeth to effectively stop the chain

dropping off when it's rough. Then there's an improved Shadow Plus rear mech that now has its clutch tension adjuster on the outside where you can easily access it.

Shimano's key advantage, however, is its price: the new XT cassette is just £79.99, compared with SRAM GX at £115, X1 at £240, X01 at £300 and XX1 at a whopping £338.

FOX FLOAT 34

Fox had been in the Climb-Trail-Descend doldrums for years, but in 2015 it decided to do something about it — and produced a trail fork that worked really, really well.

First it introduced a new chassis, lopping around 200g (wheel size dependent) off the old 34. Then it dropped the price to £749, which still sounds expensive but is slightly cheaper than its main competitor, the RockShox Pike. Most importantly, though, with CTD gone and replaced by conventional compression settings, and with the help of the latest generation FIT 4 damper, the 34's performance is now excellent.



BOTTLES, BUMBAGS & BIBSHORTS

Enduro racing continues to drive bike design, riding gear and of course fashion, so in 2015 the hydration pack was out and other forms of storage were in. We saw Fabric's funky new cage-free bottle and more bikes than ever with bottle cages — Lapierre redesigned its bikes for 2016, bolting the shock to the top tube instead of the down tube just to make way for a cage. Meanwhile Scott joined the Specialized SWAT party and added pockets to its mtb bibshorts, and Osprey and Camelbak produced bumbags for mountain bikers that are surprisingly brilliant.

HOT STUFF

WHAT WE'RE EXCITED ABOUT THIS MONTH

**MOST
WANTED**

ODI ELITE SERIES GRIPS £22.99

Thin mountain bike grips can often feel hard and uncomfortable because there's not much rubber between your hand and the bar. ODI's new Elite Series grip gets round this by using an offset design, where more rubber is placed under your palm for cushioning. On the end of the grip there's a scale, indicating plus or minus 20-degrees of adjustment to get the thicker side in the right place.

ODI has produced three grips with the new eccentric rubber — Flow, Pro and Motion. The Flow and Pro both feature a half-waffle pattern, which goes on the underside to improve grip, and the Pro also gets a row of ergonomic pads on the top to provide extra shock absorption. This extra padding does increase the thickness and as such the Pro is 32mm diameter, the single waffle

Flow 31mm and the Motion, the plainest and thinnest is 30mm.

The Elite Series also uses the new V2.1 lock-on mechanism with its single, inside clamp. Removing the outside clamp saves weight and also makes for a more comfortable grip for riders who like to ride with their hands over the end of the bar. The V2.1 clamp also features a larger 3mm bolt, which is harder to round

out, especially when compacted with dirt.

Unlike the standard lock-on grips, which have replaceable cartridges (that's the middle part of the grip), you have to bin the Elites once they're worn out. But they are cheaper, about 10 per cent lighter and, with the new offset design, definitely more comfortable.

ison-distribution.com





HARD HAT

Mavic's new CrossMax Pro helmet is aimed at all-mountain riding — the memory foam liner absorbs vibration, cushions impacts and improves the fit, and there's also a channel on the back to hold your goggle strap in place. **£115, mavic.co.uk**



DROP THE BASS

The Fugoo Tough XL is a portable Bluetooth speaker that lets you play tunes while outdoors. It's shock resistant, waterproof and also has 40 hours of run time. You can even charge your phone using its USB port. **£190, fugoo.com**



WORD UP

SplashBored is a new UK company that makes the simple front fender we've tested on page 108. It also has a range of cotton T-shirts endorsing the virtues of our sport. Enough said. **£27, splashbored.com**



TRAIL TECH

Smart watches make perfect sense off-road because you can keep up to date without having to rummage for your phone. The Alcatel OneTouch has a stack of features, including a built-in heart-rate monitor. **£99.99, currys.co.uk**



EYE CANDY

Photochromic, or adaptive lenses, are great because they darken in sunlight but go clear in low light. Rad 8 produces two types — G and LG. The latter is best for night riding and drab winter days. **£82, rad8.co.uk**



DATA LOGGER

Record all your rides with Lezyne's new Mini GPS. It can store 100 hours of data, has auto-scrolling ride info, custom lap presets and is Strava compatible. Battery life is around 10 hours. **£109.99, upgradebikes.co.uk**



LOAM RANGER

Want to build a trail but don't know what tools to buy? Then take a look at the TT-MK1 from Trailhead. It's three tools in one — rake, mattock and tamper. Pricey, but it's handmade and superbly finished. **£80, thetrailhead.co.uk**



BUDGET WIDE RANGE

If you need a wide-range cassette for your 10-speed bike, look no further than the MX-3 Sun Race. It's cheaper than most gear extender sprockets. Available in 11-42 and 11-40 ratios. **£59.99, ison-distribution.com**



FOG OFF

To stop fogging, Smith's Squad goggle features a military-grade lens coating and additional frame venting. Two lenses are included — the anti-fog version with a clear tint and a multi-layer mirrored lens (shown). **£60, saddleback.co.uk**

WINTER RIDES

Five wild trails that are good to go at any time of the year

SARN HELEN, SNOWDONIA

21km (13 miles)



ROCKY



HIGH



BIG CLIMB

A full-fun winter outing with decent surfaces and a top-notch finish. Head SW from Moel Siabod cafe (Landranger 115/SH727557), for 1km then R on a parallel road to a forest track after 2km. Sharp R at the barrier and SA at a X-roads to swing around a RH hairpin. Continue E then S to Sarn Helen and follow this down to the A470. Turn L then R and R again to follow the track S to Dolwyddelan (tea in the Spar). Take the mapped track N through the forest and across the moors for a tumultuous finish.

GPS download: po.st/SarnH

STOCKDALE LANE, YORKSHIRE DALES

18km (11 miles)



HIGH



ROCKY



BIG CLIMB

Start at the village of Settle (Landranger 98/SD819638) for this cracking south Dales outing. From there, head E towards Malham. Break left onto the drive of Stockdale Farm at the top, then keep the farm to the R to clamber up over the pass. Drop to the Malham road and turn L for 1km before taking a track W. This heads back over the fell, eventually dropping to tarmac. Hang a L then round a R bend before turning L through a gate. Now follow the BW back down into Settle — job done, and cafes and a chippie nearby!

GPS download: po.st/dales

BURRATOR RESERVOIR, DARTMOOR

25km (16 miles)



ROCKY

This one could be started in Princetown, though in winter we prefer visiting there halfway round to make the most of the facilities. From the reservoir (Landranger 201/SX550680), ride N to the cycle path that comes in from the L. Now follow this to the B3212. Cross and continue on the old railway to Princetown. Take the track beside the Plume of Feathers and follow this S to Nun's Cross, then W past Eylesbarrow mine ruins to return to the reservoir.

GPS download: po.st/Burrator

WEST HIGHLAND WAY, FORT WILLIAM

20km (12 miles)



TREES



SINGLE-TRACK

From Fort William, head E into Glen Nevis and continue to the Braveheart car park (Landranger 41/NN122736), climb SW to join the West Highland Way. Now it gets easy — swing SW and enjoy sumptuous singletrack all the way to Kinlochleven. All that's left is an easy road ride back to Fort William. Note: this route goes against the flow of the WHW... if you are riding at busy times of year, start very early and get off the trail by midday if you don't want your ride ruined.

GPS download: po.st/WestHighlandWay

JACOB'S LADDER & THE ROYCH, PEAK DISTRICT

20km (12 miles)



SINGLE-TRACK



ROCKY



TECHY

From Edale (Landranger 110/SK124853), take the road SW then S, then follow a steep track up Chapel Gate for a grapple with what's left of Rushup Edge. A great track leads NW down into the Roych and out again, and R at the X-roads on Mount Famine drops you into Coldwell Clough. Turn R and dig deep to climb to Edale Cross and descend the ever-entertaining Jacob's Ladder back into Edale.

GPS download: po.st/Jacobs



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UNDER-THE-RADAR TRAIL CENTRES

These lesser-known venues offer trail thrills without the crowds

DARREN FAWR, SOUTH WALES

Afan's unknown little brother, the Darren Fawr trails are just one valley over from the famous Glencorwg, in Garw Valley. Expect lots of rocks, steep gradients and empty trails. There's no cafe, mind. po.st/DarrenFawr

GLENLIVET, AVIEMORE

With more than 30km of nearly-new high-mountain singletrack on offer, Glenlivet in the Cairngorms should be on your trail-destination radar. They have whisky there too, and the Moray Monster trails are close by.

glenlivetestate.co.uk



CLAYTON VALE, MANCHESTER

Big-city trail centres are invaluable to urban riders, especially if they're well made and fun. Clayton Vale mountain bike trails in Manchester has 12km of decent singletrack and a skills zone too. claytonvaletrails.org



QUEEN ELIZABETH COUNTRY PARK, SOUTH DOWNS

The ancient chalky singletrack has been given a modern makeover in recent years, thanks to volunteers from the QCEP Trail Build Collective. There's a blue loop, a red, and an annual enduro race too. qecptrailcollective.co.uk



EASTRIDGE, NEAR SHREWSBURY

Eastridge Woods is an old-school classic — short but rooty, rocky and different from your average red run. There are downhill tracks and secret squirrel stuff to play on here as well. forestry.gov.uk

WHAT IS YOUR MOST EMBARRASSING MOMENT ON A BIKE?

WE ASKED



Have your say on...

[facebook.com/MBRmagazine](https://www.facebook.com/MBRmagazine)
[@mbrmagazine](https://twitter.com/mbrmagazine)

Waking up naked in rush-hour traffic during sleep cycling.

CPG

I had a go on a fat bike.

Stuart Toombs

Got up early on a beautiful morning, went hard up a steep, winding hill and had to lie down in the dirt to stop myself fainting.

Staring Into Space

Spitting my dummy out at Whinlatter. Had come off about 20 times. Decided to throw my bike off the side of the trail. Picked it up to find I had snapped off the cable boss for the rear mech.

Had to make it round the rest of the trail in one gear. D'oh!

Tony Burgess

Throwing up on another rider during a race.

Occupy the Singletrack

Werewolf drop, Cannock Chase: spent a minute reassuring a guy it was nice and easy, said "watch me, just keep tight left", and proceeded to clip my bar off a tree and tumble down it like a sack of shit.

Ryan Barton

If no one saw it's not embarrassing.

Michael Neidlinger

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SRP £84.99

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FROM MOTO TO MTB

Top mountain bikers, such as Brendan Fairclough and Manon Carpenter, like to muck around on motocross bikes — but what are they learning and why?

LINE CHOICE

Moto riders get good at reading terrain because they see a lot of it — the bikes move faster and cover more ground, making it an accelerated practice school for trail reading. MX bikes chop up the ground too, so the best lines are always changing, with the best riders reading it fastest.

APPLY IT TO THE TRAIL Ride more — the more ground you cover, the more practice you get. If you're time poor though, concentrate on one corner and try riding as many different lines as possible — you'll get a feel for how the bike works, and work out which lines are fastest. Trail centres are ideal; look as far ahead as possible and try to see lines where the masses haven't ridden. Practice every approach — the goal is to make your mind recognise different lines in an instant.

BODY POSITIONING

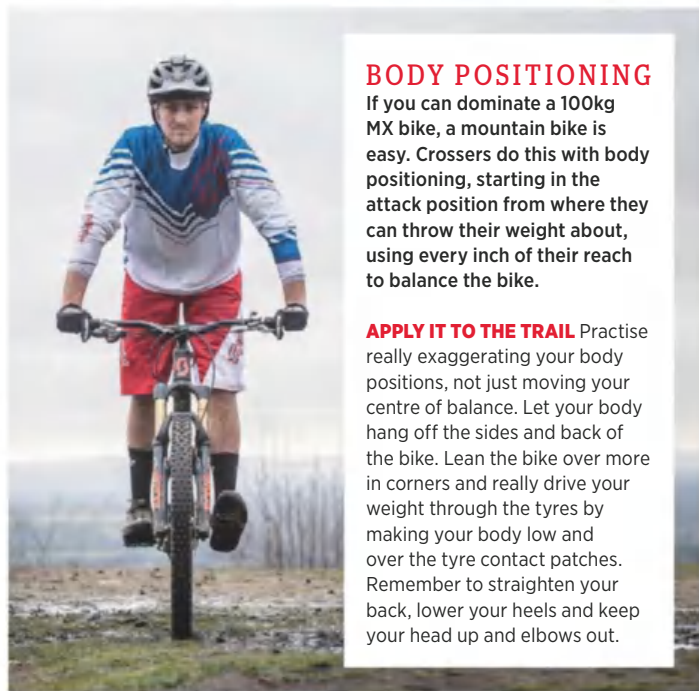
If you can dominate a 100kg MX bike, a mountain bike is easy. Crossers do this with body positioning, starting in the attack position from where they can throw their weight about, using every inch of their reach to balance the bike.

APPLY IT TO THE TRAIL Practise really exaggerating your body positions, not just moving your centre of balance. Let your body hang off the sides and back of the bike. Lean the bike over more in corners and really drive your weight through the tyres by making your body low and over the tyre contact patches. Remember to straighten your back, lower your heels and keep your head up and elbows out.

BRAKE CONTROL

Heavy bikes high speeds mean good braking is vital in moto — there's more weight to control, which forces riders to get good at it.

APPLY IT TO THE TRAIL First, the obvious stuff: use one-finger braking (save those extra fingers for gripping the bar) and work both brakes together. Use them progressively: not just on or off, gently squeeze the lever in until you're at the limit of the tyre's grip. Improve that tyre grip by getting your hips just behind the seat to keep the back wheel hooking up, and by dropping your heels and pushing the bike into the trail with your feet as you pull the lever, finding traction just as you would on the front wheel when cornering.



NEVER GET INJURED*

**OK, not never, but you can reduce the chances of time off the bike*

DO WARM UP Tight calves and hamstrings can lead to torn muscles, but a proper warm-up and cool-down will save you the soreness. Spending the first 10-15 minutes going easy, you'll steadily increase blood flow, flexibility and range of motion. And don't forget to cool down — a progressive decrease in pace will remove the waste products that inhibit recovery. Off the bike, use a foam roller post-ride to help you massage out adhesions and increase blood flow and mobility, just go slow and be gentle on the sore spots.



DON'T SKIMP ON REST DAYS Muscular and cellular adaptation to training actually takes place during down-time, so don't be fooled into thinking it won't matter if you skip rest days. Overtraining can cause muscle damage that leads to a reduction in strength and endurance as well as disrupting your sleep and immune function. Schedule in a couple of rest days a week and watch out for symptoms of overtraining, such as disturbed sleep, loss of concentration, excessive muscle soreness or a higher than normal resting heart rate.



DO FUEL PROPERLY An empty carbohydrate tank is one of the primary causes of hitting the wall during long rides, but running on empty doesn't just wreck your performance, it's also associated with injury damage to muscle-fibers. Choose slow-release carbs like oats, wholegrain bread and sweet potatoes at each meal to drip-feed your muscles energy, and aim to consume 30-60 grams of carbs an hour during rides lasting over an hour. Solid foods and sports drinks are equally as effective, so choose what feels most comfortable to consume.



"MASHING FOR SMASHING"

Pro enduro racer Joe Barnes talks pre-ride fuelling the smart way

JOE'S THEORY

"Your brain subconsciously counts the number of chews and then decides when you are too full to continue," he says. "This can put a halt on some much-needed calorie intake when it really counts."

THEORY TO PRACTICE

"Combine this with an easily-absorbable carbohydrate, while avoiding wheat like the plague, and you'll find yourself consuming vast quantities of mashed potatoes," Joe says.

WON'T CHIPS CUT IT THEN?

"No, and you wouldn't want baked or standard boiled tats, it's the mash that's the business," he tells us. "Preferably the older variety of tatties as they have less sugar and are more steady burners. Sweet potatoes are the ultimate but taste pretty funny so a 1/3 mix works well."

DO IT LIKE JOE

"Keep the chewing to a minimum, inhale an obscene amount of mash and race-day peaking will be at an all-time high. Mashing for smashing!"



"DAD, CAN I HAVE A PROPER BIKE?"

Two options for the little ripper who's too big for the balance bike but too small for the 29er

Ride with your kids and there'll come a time when nothing but a proper bike will do. Reaching about nine or 10, if they're grown up enough to handle real trails, and committed enough not to ditch the expensive bike and take up football instead, it's more than likely big bike time.

There are loads of bikes on the market for kids, but we'd avoid the really cheap supermarket options, simply because you could end up with a bike that is ruddy heavy, unreliable and not much fun to ride, which can be devastating for a kid.

If you want their first off-road experience to be a good one, take a look at Trek's new Fuel EX JR. OK, this little ripper is £1,400, but according to Trek, it's "a fully-legit, fully-loaded kids' version of our great Fuel EX". That means it has an Alpha Platinum aluminium frame and Full Floater suspension. The X-Fusion Microlite RL rear shock is tuned for lighter riders, and the matching Velvet RL fork actually gets a decent amount of travel. There's also a set of Shimano Deore disc brakes for confidence and security.

The Fuel's 12.5in frame has increased standover height, a lower bottom bracket and shorter reach for better control. Out of the box, this bike is ready to rock and roll.

With its loose fit, the Madison Short Sleeve Trail Jersey will last a while before it needs replacing. Available in four colours and three sizes. £19.99, madison.cc

A tumble and tears are inevitable when riding off-road, but keep paws protected with these mini Madison Trail gloves. Small, medium and large sizes in two colours. £12.99, madison.cc

Trek Fuel EX JR, £1,400, trekbikes.com

To stop soreness, a baggy short with a liner is an essential item for kids. Madison's Trail Short has an antibacterial pad built in, and includes tons of storage for those inevitable mid-ride sweets. Available in three sizes (age four-six, seven-nine and 10-11) £29.99, madison.cc

OTHER STUFF FOR THE LITTLE SHREDDER

NORCO FLUID

Norco is offering its Fluid range with 27.5in wheels for adults but 20, 24 and 26in for younger riders. The Fluid 2.2 gets 83mm of travel, the Fluid 4.2 has 100mm and the Fluid 6.2 features the full 120mm. All the bikes get disc brakes and proper suspension and are the perfect stepping-stones to something bigger as they get older. **Fluid 2.2** £999, **Fluid 4.2** £1,049, **Fluid 6.2** £1,099, evanscycles.com



Bell's Sidetrack Youth helmet features the impact-reducing MIPS technology. The universal size has an adjustable fit system with a PinchGuard buckle to stop it nipping the skin. £44.99, zyro.co.uk

Cube's Backpack Junior uses Deuter's excellent Airstripes ventilated back system for support. £35.99, cube.eu



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ANTIQUE CARBON

How Lotus cars, munitions and dolphins came to form the world's first carbon monocoque bike

Kee your eyes skinned on the South Downs because they might pop out if you come across Chris Hornzee-Jones. He'll be riding a piece of mountain biking heritage — the world's first carbon-fibre monocoque mtb frame. Even without a blue plaque saying "Designed 1992. One of 400. Built 1993-1994", you'll be able to spot it easily from its unique silhouette — best described as a leaping dolphin.

In the early Nineties Chris moved from the UK to California to work in aerospace composites — in his baggage there was a love of cycling, including a fascination with human powered vehicles. The lot came together in a sketch that morphed into a prototype that evolved into an extraordinary, original off-roader that was eventually sold back to the UK under the Lotus brand.

THE LOTUS SPORT

Look at it. No top tube. No seatstays. It's a softail hardtail, with compliance built into the chainstays to give it some vertical flex. And who could make titanium dropouts just 1mm thin? "That was a military munitions company that was having a hard time so gave us these hot isostatically pressed components ridiculously cheaply," says Chris. "They etched them with chemical dips to get them that thin." And is that the original XTR groupset? "No — but I was lucky to replace it with a near-perfect set off eBay," he says.

The frame is a true monocoque — made in one piece. Attempts by others in the early days had all been of two pieces (or more) joined together. Its shape may or may not have been inspired by Chris's interest in dolphins, which he'd studied in the Bahamas. Internal cable routing keeps the lines clean.

The chainstays came in for special carbon attention too, because of that softail element: the sides use high-grade aerospace material called Intermediate Modulus Carbon, and along the top and bottom glass-fibre is used with a Kevlar surface for impact protection.

1992 ALL OVER AGAIN

With hindsight, would Chris change anything if he had to do it all over again? "It was built like the proverbial brick shithouse and was very, very robust," he says. "We'd already started to pull laminate thickness out of the main beam. And I'd include new disc brakes — we did try one on the prototype but the rotor was the size of a dinner plate."

Chris still finds time to ride his very own model regularly, when he's finished working for the clients around the world who enlist the world-class expertise of his Brighton-based wind turbine design company, Aerotrope.

He also helps solve engineering problems for artists who design massive structures, including Turner Prize-winner Anish Kapoor. The Lotus Sport mountain bike is, in its own way, a modern masterpiece.



Chris shows off his little bit of history — the Lotus Sport mtb



Look, no joints! The frame owes a lot to its aerospace carbon



Military might helped engineer the slender dropouts



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THE ULTIMATE UPLIFT

Top of our list of things to do before we die: ride a floatplane trail

You can get choppered to the top of a trail in Europe, New Zealand or Australia but the Pacific Northwest is the only place you can use a floatplane. Here's what you need to know.

Why not just ride up to the trails?

You get access to more trails, just like on a regular uplift. But unlike a regular uplift you don't just gain height in a floatplane, you gain distance: a popular floatplane trip from Tyaughton Lake in the Chilcotins, BC, to 'nearby' Lorna Lake, takes just 20-30 minutes by air. The ride back, however, is nine hours of singletrack goodness through some of the most wild and beautiful scenery Canada's interior has to offer.

Where can I jump on a floatplane and how much will it cost?

Tyaxadventures.com in the Chilcotins, five hours' drive from Whistler. You can get a charter flight to a range of destinations or they do guided tours too. The plane takes four people with bikes comfortably... or five uncomfortably. Prices from C\$600.

Sell it to us then

It's a real adventure — the plane ride alone is stunning, with mountains around and sometimes above you. Then be prepared for the remotest trails you've known: beautiful singletrack with no need to share, save for the odd grizzly bear.



Seldom seen singletrack is only half an hour away...
...if you have a plane



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SWINGING A LEG OVER WHAT'S HOT THIS MONTH

FELT DECREE FRD

£7,999 / 27.5in / saddleback.co.uk

NEED TO KNOW

- Lightweight carbon trail bike with dream build
- 140mm-travel FAST carbon flex-stay suspension
- Five-bike range starting at £2,250 for Decree 30
- All models get 150mm RockShox Pikes and the same shock tune

Felt's featherweight trail machine is let down by unpredictable suspension and a cramped cockpit

There's definitely a trend for flex stays replacing pivots on longer-travel suspension bikes, but no one can accuse Felt of jumping on the leaf-spring bandwagon with its new range of Decree trail bikes.

Sporting 140mm of travel and borrowing Felt's Active Stay Technology (FAST), first developed for its short-travel Edict XC race bikes, the company has been taking advantage of carbon's ability to flex without fatigue for several years now.

The Decree also shares the Edict's simplified suspension design. Gone is the more complicated Equilink layout, replaced instead by a single-pivot set-up — the key advantages being reduced weight and improved reliability. It's too early to know if Felt has delivered on its promise of improved reliability, but it has certainly

delivered on the scales. At 11.17kg for a size medium bike, the top-end Decree FRD is super-light; the frame and shock alone weigh a mere 2.1kg.

All of that weight saving hasn't been at the expense of features either. As you'd expect, it has internal cable-routing, and a really nice touch is the removable front mech hanger, which helps maintain the clean flowing lines of the sleek carbon frame when running a 1x drivetrain. It's also Di2-compatible; the battery can be tucked up into the underside of the down tube, just above the bottom bracket.

The build kit on the FRD is every bit about shaving weight. From the foam grips to the carbon Envy wheels, sporting Guide Ultimate brakes with alloy rotor carriers, Felt has trimmed off all the excess fat. Not all of Felt's low-calorie substitutions were



Felt Decree FRD: top-drawer bike with teething problems



SPECIFICATION

Frame UHC ultimate and TeXtreme carbon, 140mm travel
Shock Monarch Plus RCT3 Debonair
Fork RockShox Pike RCT3, Dual Position Air, 150mm travel
Wheels Chris King ISO hubs, Envy 60 Forty rims, Schwalbe Nobby Nic 27.5x2.25in Trailstar tyres
Drivetrain RaceFace Next SL chainset 32t, SRAM XX1 r-mech and shifter
Brakes SRAM Guide Ultimate, 180/160mm
Components Easton Haven Carbon bar 720mm, Haven stem 70mm (size L/XL), RockShox Reverb Stealth 125mm (L/XL)
Sizes S, M, L XL
Weight 11.17kg (24.62lb)

GEOMETRY

Size ridden L
Rider height 5ft 10in
Head angle 66.5°
Seat angle 73°
BB height 345mm
Chainstay 430mm
Front centre 740mm
Wheelbase 1,170mm
Down tube 700mm
Top tube 625mm
Reach 441mm

SPOTLIGHT ON...

FAST Suspension

Felt Active Stay Technology, or FAST for short, does away with the need for seatstay pivots and bearings and the carbon stays have zero preload in the sag position, rather than at full extension. This means that the spring force in the carbon is very low at 30 per cent travel to retain good small-bump sensitivity — beyond this, the spring force in the stays ramps with the shock to help prevent bottoming.

It also means that the stays act like a super-strong negative spring in the first 30 per cent of the suspension's travel. Felt claims that this helps improve pedalling efficiency, but the effect is so pronounced that it actually reduces the usable travel from 140mm to 135mm.

Flip chip offers geometry adjustment



Removable front mech hanger keeps frame looking clean



Internally-routed cables enhance the frame's stealth looks



to my taste, however. Sure, the Easton Haven handlebar has a great profile, but at 720mm it's too narrow by today's standards. The 70mm stems on the L and XL frame sizes are a little past their best before dates too.

The proof is in the pudding, though, and on the trails that flank Lake Garda the Felt was perfectly at home one minute, out of its depth the next. On the more flowing sections of singletrack that linked the short, steep technical chutes, the bike felt reactive, stiff and poised, and once I'd swapped the 70mm stem for a 55mm, I

had no reservations about riding off the brakes and letting gravity work its magic. Give the Decree more to think about, however, and that sense of security vanished in a heartbeat.

Having had limited time on the bike, I couldn't pinpoint what was unsettling it. There is ample length in the frame, and the head angle is also ballpark for a 140mm trail bike, so it isn't the geometry or sizing that was amiss. Maybe it was the way the FAST suspension always wanted to return to the sag position, rather than fully extend, but surely this would make the bike feel more stable on steep descents?

The rear suspension was also sluggish, even though the shock had a light rebound tune. It turns out that a pre-production bearing spacer on the upper link was causing unwanted friction in the suspension. I also think the lack of support in the Dual Position Air Pike fork was really unsettling the balance of the bike. RockShox now offers Bottomless Tokens

for the Dual Position Air spring, so that should have been relatively easy to remedy. Unfortunately, no one told Felt about the new Tokens, so I'll have to wait until we get a Decree on home soil to find out if the fork really was to blame.

Alan Muldoon

The Felt was at home one minute, out of its depth the next

mbr 1ST IMPRESSION

✓ HIGHS

Stiff, lightweight frame design with a Gucci build kit. Having the same shock tune and carbon rear ends on all five models guarantees the same suspension response, regardless of price.

✗ LOWS

Narrow 720mm handlebar, rangy 70mm stem. Also, the sticky rear suspension and lack of Bottomless Tokens in the fork made it impossible to get a good feel for the Decree's handling.



KONA PRECEPT 150

£1,899.99 / 27.5in / konaworld.com

Kona's latest enduro bike hits the mark when it comes to value; but at what price?

NEED TO KNOW

- More affordable version of the Process 153
- 150mm-travel with 27.5in wheels
- Slack geometry and frame design mirrors top-end Process range
- Wide bar, short stem, tacky tyres

You only get one first ride on a bike, and usually it's enough to suss out your initial thoughts on how it feels and whether it really 'works'. Not this time though, I've taken the Precept out for a handful of rides simply because I couldn't figure it out... or figure out if I liked it or not.

The Precept range is all about offering good performance at a low price — it's basically the cheaper alternative to the top-end Kona Process 153 line. The range is unusual, though, because instead of offering various spec levels across the Precept spread, Kona offers it with four travel options, from 120mm all the way up to a 200mm downhill bike.

The Precept 150 is a very competent bike to descend on and there's a ton of travel to soak up big hits and drops. The suspension does feel a bit dead at the top of its travel though, so this is really a bike for steep, rocky terrain rather than mellow singletrack. Get it up to speed and it starts to feel more playful and easy to loft the front end, something I think is helped by the short chainstays. Kona has actually gone slightly slacker and lower than the flashier Process geometry, and it's something I like very much combined with the short stem, wide bar and excellent High Roller II tyres. It's a heavy bike with heavy

wheels, which does make the Precept feel really stable and solid on rough stuff.

It's not just a bit heavy though; at over 15kg it's a tank. The climbing position is not helped by the seatpost either: a 100mm drop KS Eten that isn't anywhere near long enough for a bike with such a short seat tube, or a rider with my lanky legs. In short, I couldn't get the saddle high enough. Worse, it wouldn't stay extended, thanks to a faulty seal inside the post.

If Kona had unveiled the Precept 150 a couple of years ago it would have been exciting. But today, it feels left behind by some mighty competition from the direct sales brands: the YT Capra Al 1 is only £85 more and Canyon's Strive Al 6.0 is £2,000, and both are arguably better bikes, or at the very least lighter bikes.

Jamie Darlow



1ST IMPRESSION



HIGHS

Good geometry, twinned with confident suspension on big stuff.



LOWS

Too heavy, and too late to steal a march on the excellent competition.

Neat 40mm stem matched to a 760mm bar is spot-on



SPECIFICATION

Frame 6061 aluminium, 150mm travel
Shock RockShox Monarch RT
Fork RockShox Sektor Solo Air, 150mm travel
Wheels Shimano Deore hubs, WTB SX25 rims, Maxxis High Roller II 27.5x2.4in tyres
Drivetrain SRAM S1000 chainset double and bash, SRAM X5 f-mech, X7 r-mech and shifters
Brakes Shimano Deore, 203mm
Components Kona XC/BC 760mm bar, Kona XC/BC 40mm stem, KS Eten R seatpost
Sizes S, M, L, XL
Weight 15.2kg (33.5lb)

GEOMETRY

Size ridden L
Rider height 6ft 1in
Head angle 65.4°
Seat angle 67.6°
BB height 335mm
Chainstay 424mm
Front centre 776mm
Wheelbase 1,200mm
Down tube 716mm
Top tube 620mm
Reach 460mm

DMR TRAILSTAR

£499 (frame only) / 27.5in / upgradebikes.co.uk

British firm relaunch a classic with a twist

NEED TO KNOW

- A 27.5in trail hardtail that's compatible with a 150mm-travel fork
- Can be upgraded to 27.5 Plus wheels using 8mm longer Swopout dropouts
- Stealth dropper routing and 1x specific
- 4130 cro-mo steel frame is available in two colours and three sizes

To celebrate its 20th anniversary, DMR has relaunched the legendary Trailstar. The original hooligan hardtail could turn its hand to just about anything — dirt jumping, trail riding, you name it — and the new bike is just as versatile, if not more so. To replicate the ride quality of the original, and to keep the price low, it's still made from 4130 cro-mo, but it now gets 27.5in wheels, slacker and lower geometry and a slew of contemporary frame features.

The Trailstar uses DMR's Swopout modular dropout system. Standard dropouts are designed for 27.5in wheels, but by fitting a set of the 8mm longer dropouts (a £19.99 upgrade), and a compatible fork, you can run 27.5 Plus size tyres, or even 29er wheels. You can also use the 8mm dropout with the standard 27.5in wheels as a geometry tweak to grow the chainstay length and wheelbase.

Bringing it bang up to date, the new Trailstar will only run a 1x drivetrain and, unusually for a hardtail, features internal routing for a dropper post. Our test bike came with a dialled spec — stubby 50mm DMR Defy stem, 800mm wide Wingbar and one of DMR's comfy Stage One saddles. It even came with a stiff DMR Axe chainset with oversized 30mm spindle.

DMR claim that the Trailstar's head angle is 66 degrees, but it actually measures 65.3 degrees! Combine this with the relatively long wheelbase and you have a bike that absolutely rips through corners. It also feels totally composed on steep stuff and has a lively and engaging ride quality. There's also that twang of acceleration when you exit



Modular dropout system offers an array of build options

a turn that you only seem to get from a good quality steel frame.

The Trailstar is such a blast to ride that I regularly forgot I was riding a hardtail — the compliant steel rear end taking the edge off trail chatter. I still had to take my foot off the gas on the really rough stuff, though, to prevent my feet getting blown clean off the pedals.

At £499, the new Trailstar is a lot of bike for the money — you could build an awesome winter bike for just over a grand. The original was great, but this one is on a whole new level.

Paul Burwell

mbr 1ST IMPRESSION

✓ HIGHS

Revamped geometry and up-to-date features makes it even better than the original; it's also excellent value for money.

✗ LOWS

With the fork travel and slack geometry it's easy to forget it's a hardtail.

SPECIFICATION

Frame 4130 cro-mo
Fork X-Fusion Sweep, 150mm travel
Wheels DMR Zone wheelset, Continental Trail King 27.5x2.4in tyres
Drivetrain DMR Axe crankset with 30T Blade chainring, Shimano Zee rear mech and shifter, Praxis 11-42t cassette
Brakes SRAM Guide R
Components Selle Italia X1 saddle, X-Fusion dropper seatpost, DMR Defy stem and 800mm Wingbar handlebar
Sizes S, M, L
Weight 14.36kg (31.09lbs)

GEOMETRY

Size ridden M
Rider height 5ft 10in
Head angle 65.3°
Seat angle 71.7°
BB height 325mm
Chainstay 430mm
Front centre 740mm
Wheelbase 1,170mm
Down tube 710mm
Top tube 614mm
Reach 621mm



ROCKY MOUNTAIN MAIDEN WORLD CUP

£5,999.99 / 27.5in / bikes.com

NEED TO KNOW

- Full carbon downhill bike
- Can run 27.5in or 26in wheels
- Ride 9 adjustable geometry

A slew of stand-out design features and a truly inspiring ride means Rocky Mountain's new downhill rig has been worth the wait

We spied a prototype of Rocky Mountain's, then nameless, replacement for the Flatline downhill bike more than three years ago. And that version was already 12 months into development. So what has taken Rocky Mountain so long with this new Maiden? Well, the wheel size — dare I say it — 'revolution' put a stick in the spokes and forced the Maiden back to the drawing board. Then Rocky Mountain realised that the lightweight bushings it uses on its other full-suspension bikes would generate too much friction with the huge Maiden pivots, so switched to a more conventional ball bearing system.

Better to get it right first time, though, and — looking at the finished article —

giving it that time to marinade has really been worthwhile. Bristling with clever design details, the Maiden gets a version of Rocky Mountain's attitude adjustment chip — Ride 9 — offering (confusingly) four different geometry settings. Internal cable routing makes an appearance, stealthily hiding cables and hoses behind wide-mouth access ports. There are bespoke integrated frame protectors, a mudguard for the shock and even internal storage for a Shimano Di2 battery.

One feature that really stands out is the Maiden's willingness to embrace either 26in or 27.5in wheels. Two axle positions at the rear dropouts, and a chunky spacer that presses in below the head tube, allow you to run smaller wheels without compromising





The perfect position
inspires confidence
on all surfaces



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BOS takes charge of
damping duties

SPECIFICATION

Frame Smoothwall carbon, 200mm travel
Shock BOS Stoy Rare
Fork BOS Idylle Air, 200mm travel
Wheels Stans Neo hubs, Stans ZTR rims, Maxxis Minion DHR II 3C 27.5x2.4in tyres
Drivetrain Race Face Atlas Cinch cranks, Shimano Saint r-mech and shifter
Brakes Shimano Saint, 203mm
Components Race Face Atlas 800mm bar, Rocky Mountain direct-mount stem, Race Face Turbine seatpost
Weight 15.87kg (35lb)
Sizes S, M, L, XL

GEOMETRY

Size ridden L
Rider height 5ft 10in
Head angle 62.6° (slackest setting)
Seat angle 73.9°
BB height 338mm
Chainstay 430mm
Front centre 800mm
Wheelbase 1,230mm
Down tube 710mm
Top tube 602mm
Reach 428mm

the geometry. It's definitely a worthy decision on Rocky Mountain's part, and it will make the Maiden frame an attractive proposition if you've got a shed full of 26in downhill parts.

The full carbon frame — that's front triangle, seatstay and rocker link — is as sleek and sculptural inside as out, thanks to high-end Smoothwall construction that uses EPS moulds instead of inflatable bags. And at just under 15.9kg

(35lb) for a complete bike in size large, the weight saving brought by the carbon is both obvious and appreciated.

UK distributor, Greenover, sells the Maiden frameset, as well as four complete builds running from £3,500 to a whopping £9,500! We rode it in World Cup trim, specced with BOS suspension, along with a mix of Shimano Saint and Race Face Atlas components. With no markings on either the Idylle Air fork or Stoy Rare shock, and damping that prefers to be set up with a pit-crew rather than in the lift queue, it took a while for me to get dialled on the Maiden. Once I'd found some base settings online at BOSmtb.com, the bike came alive.

This is a versatile rig, as playful in the bike park as it is smashing a race run. The riding position was absolutely spot-on for my height (5ft 10in on a size large) and gave rock-solid confidence without ever feeling unwieldy. Short 165mm cranks allowed me to exploit the lowest, slackest Ride 9

setting, creating a real sense of sitting in the bike that felt amazing when loading the bike up through corners.

The Maiden may have taken a while to emerge from the womb, but on first impressions, Rocky Mountain has pulled off an immaculate conception.

Danny Milner

mbr 1ST IMPRESSION



HIGHS

Great-looking frame, sweet handling, doesn't turn its back on 26in wheels.



LOWS

BOS suspension requires reading the manual. Expect some play from the fork bushings out of the box, wide stays equal heel scuffs, coil shock means faffing around with spring rates.

This is a versatile rig, as playful in the bike park as it is smashing a race run

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REAL WORLD RIDING

Dan Trent just wants to ride — but life keeps getting in the way



She's still got it

A partner who rides is a competitor for free time

Those in a relationship with a non-riding partner often wish they could share their passion with their beloved, but let me offer some words of caution. "I'm off for a ride ..." may get you a look of resignation from someone who doesn't understand what all the fuss is about. It may put you in the domestic doghouse for choosing the bike over Sunday trips to Ikea, lunch with the in-laws or whatever else it is normal people do of a weekend.

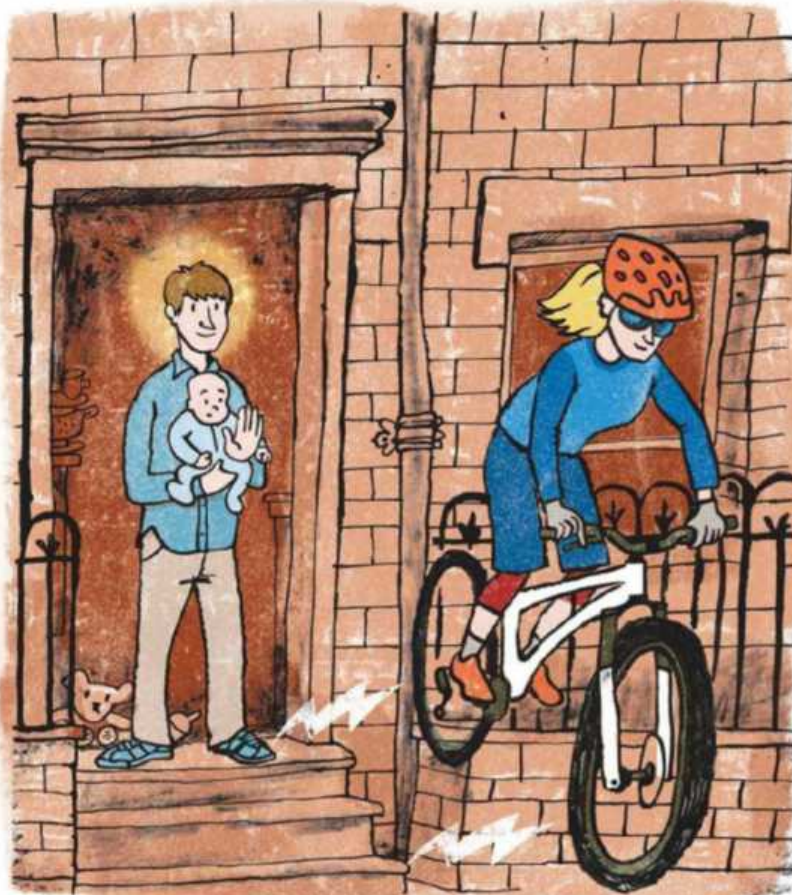
But, believe me, the tense moment you drop that bombshell is nothing compared with when it's to a partner who does — but for some reason can't — ride.

Please be clear, I entirely understand Mrs T's position. She knows how much fun ragging around on a bike can be. Who can blame her a pang of envy when she sees me return from a ride, mud-splattered and high on fresh air and adrenalin while she's been tending to two screaming kids?

I'm not painting a flattering picture of myself here. But before you write me off as some sort of selfish, chauvinistic pig, I have — honestly — been working hard to contrive a role-reversal that leaves me holding the baby while she shreds the trails. But it's been a long game of confidence building, diplomacy and more than a little plotting and scheming. Not to mention some (cough) essential scoping out of local trails and laying of GPS breadcrumbs for her to follow on the Garmin. Selfless sacrifice and all that.

But this does address one of the major obstacles. My West Yorkshire trail knowledge may be 20 years out of date but I do at least know my Norland Top from my Peckett Well and can improvise a join-the-dots between navigational landmarks. All Mrs T sees is an impenetrable and mysterious maze of steep, rocky trails interspersed with cobbled climbs that don't so much require a granny ring as a winch. And it didn't help that our first ride out together ended up as a bit of a gorge scramble after I forgot a crucial turning. First impressions and all that.

So if she's to head out she needs a guide. Probably just as well it has to be



I get a huge vicarious thrill from waving her off from the doorstep

someone else as I'm evidently useless at it. So I have been schmoozing the local gang and I've recruited a couple of friendly riders happy to have her along and show her the ropes.

Then we reach the second obstacle. She thinks the loss of pace and confidence caused by a year out of the saddle means she'll disgrace herself in front of a new buddy. This is utter rubbish, of course; those early exploratory rides reveal that the base level of fitness earned over a decade of riding remains a solid foundation, even after an extended break. She'll still argue with me when I tell her she's quick enough, but Strava is a tougher opponent — cups and QoMs can't be shouted down as easily!

So. She knows where she's going, she's got the legs for it and she has a ton of riding credits to cash in. I'd love to join her, but in fact I get a huge vicarious thrill from waving her off from the doorstep as the domestic chaos unfolds behind me and then tracking her route on Strava when she gets back, buzzing with post-ride excitement and temporary liberation from family chores.

Mission accomplished, Mrs T is back in the saddle and I'm chuffed to have had a helping hand in making it happen. Or I was, until I thought it through and realised I'd created an arch-rival for those precious windows of opportunity in the domestic schedule.

Got a non-riding partner? You might want to keep 'em that way...

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BORN AGAIN RIDER

After years off the bike, veteran mtb snapper Geoff Waugh has caught the bug again

Life lesson

Why does it take a fall to get you up to speed with first aid?

This month's column may sound like preaching (and in some ways it is), but don't let that stop you tucking in.

It harks back to the first time I saw a biker crash and lose consciousness. It was one of my mates in the early days of mtb'ing, when exploring the edges of the envelope meant attempting a short, steep drop. If you felt particularly brave (or had a gallery of braying 'friends'), you might try a jump.

The consequences of such a harebrained idea could be brutal — especially if you attempted dropping off the roof of a wartime pillbox on to a patch of flat beach.

Pushing his sturdy Raleigh Mustang to the opposite edge of the grey concrete, my mate peered over the edge and declared it 'doable'. He wheeled back to the opposite side of the building, straightened the Lycra cover on his helmet and pushed off.

The mistake he made was classic; he neglected to pull the front wheel up enough to clear the lip. We've all done it. YouTube and *You've Been Framed* bear witness. The front of his bike dropped unerringly towards the sand below and his body followed, describing a similar arc before it went into a fetal position as he hit the ground with the back of his head.

As with all these events, it happened in slow motion. And, as with all events involving mates, I laughed. For a second. And then when he didn't move and began making guttural grunts, I crapped myself. I jumped off the pillbox and knelt by his side as his brain fought to bring him back into consciousness. His eyeballs rolled and the noises were from another place.

I ran to my car and called 999 on my Motorola housebrick of a mobile phone, and then sprinted back to the beach. All I could think about was that the way he had fallen could have produced catastrophic injuries. I squeezed his hands and toes, asking him if he could feel and move them. He could. Major relief. Then the ambulance arrived and he was carted off to hospital, checked over and released with no more than some bruises and wounded pride. The Mustang lived on, because those bikes could survive a carpet bombing.



We've all done it,
Youtube & You've Been Framed
bear witness

There have been plenty of crashes since then, and plenty of injuries — some superficial and others requiring a little bit more than a kiss from yer mum and a big plaster. But — and here's the preaching part — if a mate of yours had a life-changing stack out on the trail, would you know what to do? When my pal crashed, I felt helpless, ineffectual and very, very scared. What if, by helping, I did more harm than good?

You've probably been in a similar situation, and it's terrifying. The worst case scenario happened to my great friend Michael Bonney (ex-supremo of Orange Bikes, who was paralysed from the neck down in 2013). If it hadn't been for doctors close by, riding the same event as him, he may not have survived.

So how much first aid do you know? We can take the rise out of St John Ambulance volunteers, but at least they have training. Your average biker has none... and yet many of us ride in very remote places.

Think about it. It had never crossed my mind to seek first-aid training until Michael's accident. The person who suggested it to me was first at the scene that day, and felt utterly helpless too.

That phone call all those years ago on my hefty Motorola had perhaps planted the seed, making me aware that I should learn the basics. It doesn't cost the earth, and it could be the difference between life and death. I learned it's far better to do something than nothing at all, so what's stopping you?



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★ STAR LETTER ★

EPIC DOESN'T FAIL

"Do a multi-day race," the magazine said. "It should be on everyone's mountain biking bucket list." So when Epic Cymru came up, based only a stone's throw from home and using local trails, I thought: if you don't do it now, you never will. I know Afan and Glyncorrwg fairly well and I've done lots of single-day races — it'll just be like stringing four or five of them together.

I arrived for the prologue at Margam Park, where there were a lot of extremely racy looking people about. "Still, I'm here now," I thought. "And I've paid a deposit on the timing chip." I completed the course in last-but-one place, having been trampled in the rush of people passing me... it was going to be a very long four days.

Then, on stages one and two, which used the Afan Valley trails, local knowledge was a disadvantage as we climbed the Jet Lag section on Skyline, which is normally a descent. The highlight of stage three was the look on the faces of hardened DH riders as Lycra-clad racers



Epic Cymru: worth it just for the experience

on carbon-fibre hardtails nailed it down Rim Dinger and Deep Navigation at BPW. Stage four produced the Welsh weather that had been sadly lacking for the previous four days — it was raining at the off and it was still raining as I crossed the finishing line, trails turned to streams, streams into torrents and puddles into ponds. But I didn't care — if I

had to carry the bike I was going to finish.

My thanks to Matt Page and his crew for the race and especially to Jamie, the tail-end marshal who spent more time with me than is strictly good for you.

Will I be back to defend my Lanterne Rouge next year? You bet.

Richard Haskayne

RETURN TO SENDER

As someone who enjoys a bargain, I ordered some 3k weave carbon 720mm mountain bike bars on eBay for £13.50. When they arrived I took them to my LBS for fitting, as I don't have a torque wrench. They couldn't get any grips to lock on, so they measured both ends' diameters and found a 0.7mm discrepancy. That doesn't seem like much, but it's enough to render the bars useless.

I have had literally brilliant lights from China, but I will think twice about using eBay again. I think I'll go back to that LBS and try their bars...

Brian King

TABLETOP MANNERS

I have loved seeing so many new people on their bikes over the last couple of years as I'm always stoked to see people out and about enjoying a ride. But as trail centres get busier and busier, I keep thinking about trail etiquette...

Have a bit of consideration for others on the trail. If you are much quicker than those in front, choose your passing point carefully and give plenty of notice of what you are going to do. If you are still building up your confidence, pull well off the trail to take a breather or plan your lines for the next section of trail.

If you see someone stopped to fix a mechanical, give them a holler and just check they are all good, especially now the weather is starting to change. We've all been there and forgotten a simple bit of kit and had to try and bodge a trailside fix. Remember, you might be the grateful recipient of someone's offer of help in the future so extend the same courtesy to others.

No one likes seeing litter. Whether it's a drinks bottle, an inner tube you replaced or a gel wrapper, take it home with you! You will either have a bag or a pocket to stuff it back into.

Ben Midgley



Upgrading your bike can make more sense than upgrading its parts

Ed — Come on Ben, next you'll be wanting to introduce speed limits and overtaking lanes on singletrack! Can't people be trusted to figure this stuff out for themselves, without the nanny state interfering? Agree about the litter droppers though, they need locking up.

PETTIFOG PRODUCTS

When you review products do you quote manufacturer weight or actual tested weight? I noticed this with the Answer Atac AME stem review. I have this stem and the Syntace Megaforce: the Answer is 93g not the 105g quoted (some 14g lighter than the Syntace, hence the flex). It is, however, 105g including headcap, spacers and screw. I think it may actually be the lightest stem on the market for its size.

I appreciate there are differences in the manufacturing process but 12g is more than 10 per cent, which I've never come across with stems before. I feel that by using the claimed manufacturer's weight it somehow feels the review doesn't paint an accurate picture of the product and I therefore find the review less credible.

Rob Matthews

Ed — We spoke to Mick about the Answer stem test and this is what he had to say. "I weighed the stem independently as always (with top cap as it was one of those colour-coordinated countersunk ones). My experience is that the stiffness of a product is always more a result of engineering, shaping and materials rather than being determined simply by weight alone.

"I've used the Syntace stem referenced on several occasions and never noticed it as anything other than rock solid. Compared to this and the five or so other

super-stubby stems I've used, the Answer Atac AME stem wasn't, which is why I called it out in the review."

FRAMESET OR MATCH?

I'm relatively new to mountain biking, with my first real go at Whinlatter in the Lakes just over four years ago starting the annual trips to various places (BikePark Wales being the recent godsend!). I then started kicking it up a gear in 2013 when my girlfriend (with help from my brother) got me a 2011 GT Aggressor 1.0, meaning we could head over to local trails at Aston Hill (near Wendover/Berkhamsted) a lot more frequently to really try and improve my riding.

I've been really enjoying learning more and more about the sport, throwing myself down trails to see what happens and loving every minute of it (albeit I'm still too trigger happy on the brakes!). But I've also quite enjoyed learning about the bike itself and upgrading bits and pieces over the years.

I'm mainly a cross-country rider but I would like to learn more and more about getting better at going down harder trails and improving at jumps/drop offs etc. I'm wondering whether you can help me with trying to figure out some part of my next upgrade plan? I've upgraded a few parts already but I'm not sure where to go next — there are so many options! Do I go for the medium/smaller upgrades first (bar, groupsets etc.) or just jump straight to a new frame and fork?

Luke Thackray

Ed — How long is a piece of string?! Tough question. Our advice would be, if you're already thinking of upgrading your frame and fork, you're better off getting a whole new bike and flogging the old one on eBay — it'll be cheaper and there are a whole host of compatibility landmines waiting for you otherwise.



QUICK LINES

CAR RACK QUERY

Please could you give me the brand name and part details of the fork mount which is featured in your piece 'Build a DIY car rack' on page 28 of your October issue.

Michael Clarke

Ed — Jason says "I found the Kuat Dirtbag 15mm Fork Mount online, but if you just search 15mm fork mount you'll see a variety of designs available. Obviously you need to make sure it's the right axle size for your bike. Do send us pics of your design."

OLD BLOKES

WHO SHOULD KNOW BETTER

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WHO Lee Black **WHERE** BikePark Wales **WHEN** July 1, 2014 **HOW** Broken collarbone. After a year off the mtb and a spell on the dark side (had to keep the legs spinning) he's hoping to get back out on the Iron Horse soon.



WHO Pete McCarthy **WHERE** Forest of Dean **WHEN** October 2015 **HOW** Front wheel washed out on fire road trying to avoid puddle, ended up landing in puddle anyway!



WHO Martin Keys **WHERE** North Third, Stirling **WHEN** September 2015 **HOW** Caught pedal on the ground on the easiest section of trail.



WHO Calum Murdoch **WHERE** Glenlivet **WHEN** August 2015 **HOW** Over-committed the last drop, landed (mostly) on face/nose (broken nose and eight x-rays). Doctor who fixed him up said he'd "healed quite nicely".

ALTURA

ALWAYS ATTACK

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THE BIG QUESTION

Every day, **mbr**'s forum is awash with advice, stories and gossip. Here's what you've been talking about this month.

How do you feel about the inevitable creep of technology into mtb'ing?

When the nukes drop, the EMP will destroy all Di2 bikes and I'll still be escaping Terminators on my old mechanically geared mtb!

Neillo

It is human nature to experiment and develop through trial and error. I say "Yes!" to anything new... whether it stands the ultimate test of consumer preference is a different matter altogether!

DISGreece

Not sure why it would take the soul out of the sport unless you get monotonous health and safety announcements and disclaimers when you "turn on" your bike

No Gear No Idea

Bike development is like evolution, if it works and survives the reviews, it gets bought and talked about. If the talk is good, it survives. Biking is littered with developments that didn't survive. But look what fantastic bikes we are riding now!

Steve Sordy

I don't see the point in electronics on mountain bikes, at least you know if a cable snaps then you can replace it at the side of the trail! If your electronics fail, you're buggered.

Snake Plissken

What's the point in making something that has worked fine for decades, more complicated, heavier, and expensive?

Nik Gnashers

Just looking up some new standard equipment for the trail pack; soldering iron, did someone say?

MTBLeague

NEXT MONTH

WHAT'S ON YOUR BUCKET LIST FOR 2016?

Join the debate at po.st/bucketlist



01



02



03



04



YOUR PHOTOS

- 01 Ian Harty on his local trails in NE Scotland. Photo: Gavin Robb
- 02 Spencer and Asha out for a blast. Photo: Ian Garton
- 03 An Orange Five on a wet Lakeland day. Photo: Sally Allsop
- 04 Leaning back and enjoying the Welsh sunshine. Photo: Toby Ruck
- 05 Riding the Saharan Dunes on a Surly. Moonlander. Photo: Pete Smith



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05



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FINALE LIGURE PASS IT ON

*White-knuckle trails and white sandy beaches are a mix
made in heaven... or rather Italy*

Words & photos: Sim Mainey

The act of passing on trail knowledge is as old as making fire, as sharpening a flint into a bear-stabbing device or, more importantly, the concept of the wheel. Back before we had Stephen Fry giving us directions through our sat navs, or even drawn maps and compasses, we had to rely on the sun, the stars and memory to make our way from A to B. If you didn't already know the way, you had to ask someone who had already been there

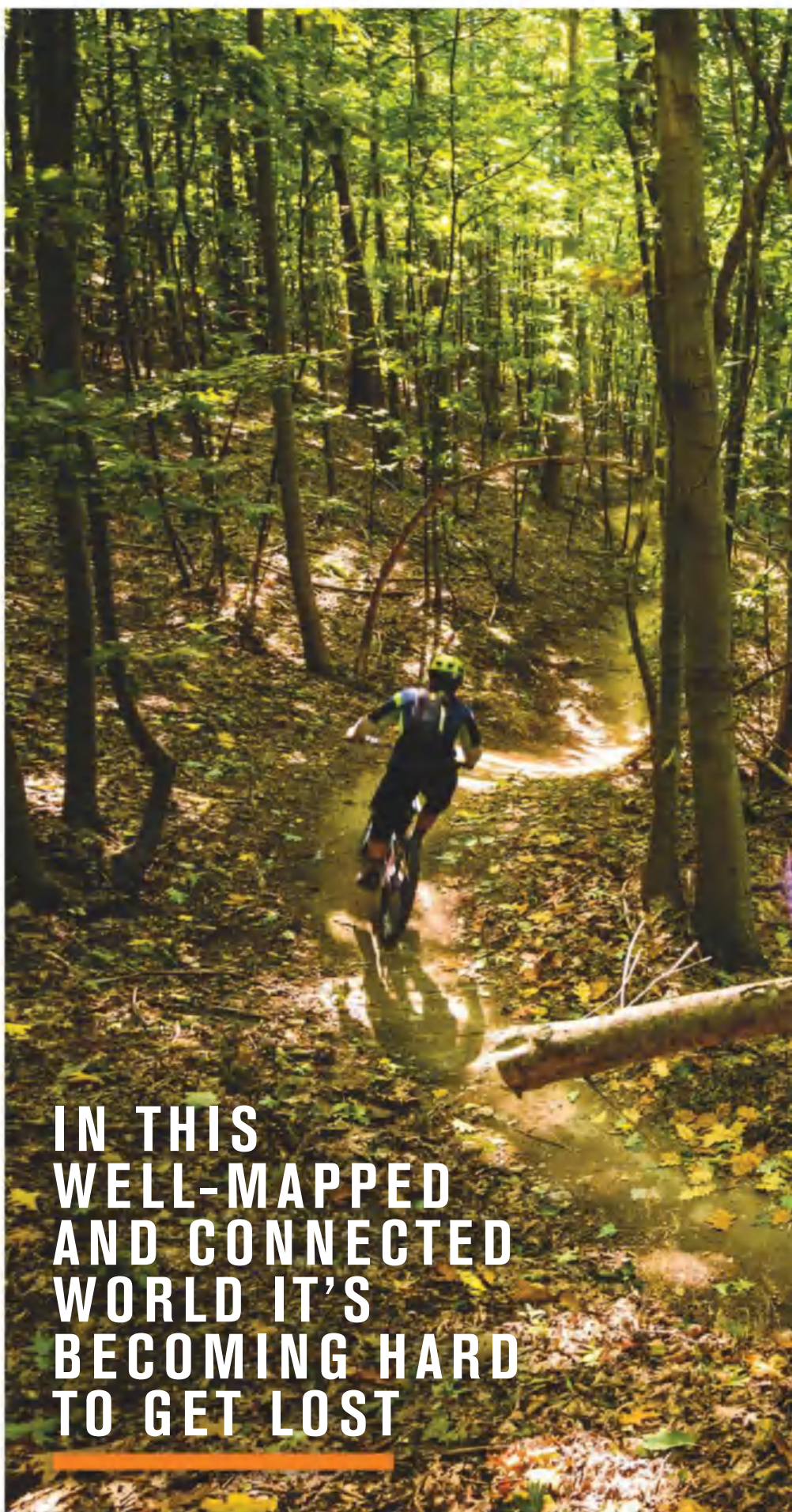
to describe the route — undoubtedly a man with a huge beard. They'd then have to remember and describe the way (hopefully accurately) and in turn you'd then have to remember it and, if needed, pass that information on to someone else.

Memory isn't the most reliable of things though. I have a memory that I like to call 'selective' but my wife calls 'useless'. Most of what I learned at school has been lost among the detritus, fluff and useless facts that litter my mind — I can remember the lyrics to pretty much every song on the 'Now That's What I Call Music 29' double-disc album, far easier than my times tables. This isn't actually that surprising though, songs have a habit of sticking in your mind and it's for this reason the Aborigines of Australia use them for navigation. It's a novel, but very clever way of committing a route to memory in which they sing their way through a landscape with geographical features incorporated into the lyrics. Bruce Chatwin's book *Songlines* is well worth a read if you'd like to know how to get across Australia with nothing more than a song (Caution: more than a song is actually required for crossing Australian deserts).

Mountain bikers might not pass on trail knowledge using song (although I'd love to 🎵)



Scrawled trail maps are far from black and white



**IN THIS
WELL-MAPPED
AND CONNECTED
WORLD IT'S
BECOMING HARD
TO GET LOST**



Winding woodland
trails are dappled
with sunshine



Dave and Dan dust
up on their trail
knowledge

SWOOPING CORNERS, BLIND CRESTS, G-OUTS AND JUMPS DRAG LAUGHS OUT OF US AT EVERY TURN

hear the Route Guide section sung by the **mbr** staff choir (Ed — Gareth Malone was booked up, sorry), but there's definitely still a culture, even an obligation, to take a trail and pass it on in some way. Guides make a living from sharing their hard-won knowledge of trails (some of these trail gurus still have huge beards) and there are magazines, books and websites dedicated to showing you the best places to ride your bike. Without trails and at least some idea of where you're going, mountain biking is just wandering with a bike. No bad thing in itself but it does lack a bit of, well, direction. In this well-mapped and connected world it's becoming increasingly hard to get lost and incredibly easy to share trail knowledge. Ultimately though it comes down to a rider finding a trail and then deciding to share it.

ROLLERCOASTER RIDE

I first visited Finale Ligure on the Italian Riviera for Benji Haworth's stag do. Benji (one-time **mbr** columnist and full-time trail savant) had been put on to Finale by some friends who had spent some time getting lost on the trails that encircle the town. They'd marked what they had found on a map, a copy of which Benji had brought with him. Benji's Istituto Geografico Militare d'Italia (Italian for OS map) was covered with black dashes, some following marked trails, others randomly cutting across the contour lines. Next to them were names like Wolfs Bane, Rockissmo and Super Technicale. The stag party spent a week in the sun and rain retracing some of these trails as well as adding a few more as we stumbled across hidden gems that we thought were worth revisiting at some point in the future. Trails passed to us, and trails we could pass on.

So, I feel it is in some way my duty to tell you about Finale Ligure, to pass on what I know and let you in on what has been, until recently, a bit

of a secret mountain biker's paradise. Imagine easy access uplifts, imagine climbs that will have you puking onto your bar-ends (if you're that way inclined), imagine some of the best downhill trails, both signposted and hidden, that all end on the shores of the Mediterranean — primo caffè, birra and gelato easily to hand and a town that truly welcomes riders. It's easy to love Finale.

I know I'm not the only one who feels like this. Finale Ligure has a special something about it and with it becoming the 'finale' of the Enduro World Series it's managed to charm even more riders. Over the years I've been quietly pushing Finale to my riding friends. If they have an urge to ride abroad but want to avoid the Alps, if they want somewhere that non-riding partners will enjoy while they take to the hills, I've whispered sweet Finales in their ears. Last year I managed to convince my mate Dave to drive the two of us down to watch the EWS race and ride some Italian singletrack and this year I've persuaded my regular trail buddy Dan to tag along too and to show him what keeps bringing me back to this part of the world.

"I'm going to move here". Sun glitters on the Med and the smell of thyme wafts in on a warm breeze. We're on the first trail of the first day and already Dan is sold. Lying in the sand and shrub by the side of the trail, Dave and I nod in agreement. A bit of downtime mid-photoshoot to take stock of where we are and what we're doing, putting a touch of perspective on things and taking in the sights and smells. No point rushing things, we are on Italian time after all.

The trail we're currently riding, Rollercoaster, is a new one to me and I'm enjoying it as much as Dave and Dan — the endless swooping corners, blind crests, g-outs and jumps effortlessly drag laughs out of us at every turn. We'd turned up at Freeride Finale that morning with a fistful of



A break in the trees
opens up a view of the
glinting Italian Riviera

euros and a request for a single uplift to the top of the trail with the best views in town. Uplift driver Michele had pointed us to Rollercoaster, local knowledge giving us exactly what we were after and more.

WHERE NOW?

Dust hangs in the air as we ride as fast as we dare, trying to keep each other's back wheels in sight. I ruin things, as I do, by insisting on stopping and taking photos but there are no objections to my "one more time" requests. One more becomes two more without much persuasion. This is the kind of trail you could ride every day and never tire of, you'd just get faster.

There are no more arrows, no more markers, just tarmac. Rollercoaster has seemingly ended and dumped us on the road. We look around wondering where our next trail-fix is coming from. Is there another trail or is that it? We don't want to lose any height on the road so we sit on the



"The timed section began back there... didn't I tell you?"



This Rollercoaster packs in more thrills than any fairground attraction



Braking bumps: the pace slackens for a technical section

SOME SECTIONS INVOLVE WHAT DAN TERMS 'RABBIT'S NOSE', BY WHICH I THINK HE MEANS TWITCHY

verge and wait to see if any other riders pass so we can beg directions and pick up the scent of a trail. Time ticks on and the only other riders we see are on road bikes, grinding their way up to one of the many hilltop towns. Phones are checked for traces of 3G signal to see if Strava or Google Earth can shed some light on things but we draw a blank. We're stumped. Two mountain bikers eventually whiz past us heading down the road only to reappear two minutes later looking equally lost. They have a hand-drawn map from one of the bike shops in town describing where to pick up the trail once Rollercoaster ends. We look at the sheet of A4 and remain as clueless as before. The five of us hypothesise as to what various doodles and scrawlings might relate to before deciding to split up — Dave, Dan and I head off one way and the scrawled map owners the other. Turns out we probably made the better call.

TRAIL SEPARATION

We catch sight of a signpost that hints at more trails. With no map, no clue and nothing to lose we follow the arrow up a dusty farm track. Stopping to assess where the hell we might be, we are joined by some rather enthusiastic Italians who clearly know what's up ahead. Using international sign language, broken Italian and cracked English, we work out that basically wherever we go from this point we are on the right track for good trails.

Five minutes later our bikes are on our backs as we shimmy precariously along a narrow path at the bottom of a cliff face. Sensing this probably isn't the right way, we backtrack to the last junction to have another stab at finding something rideable. The trail divides into three and then into two again, trails off trails off trails. We tell ourselves we aren't lost, we're exploring, but it'd be pretty damn good to have a clue as to which path to take. One trail in particular looks a likely

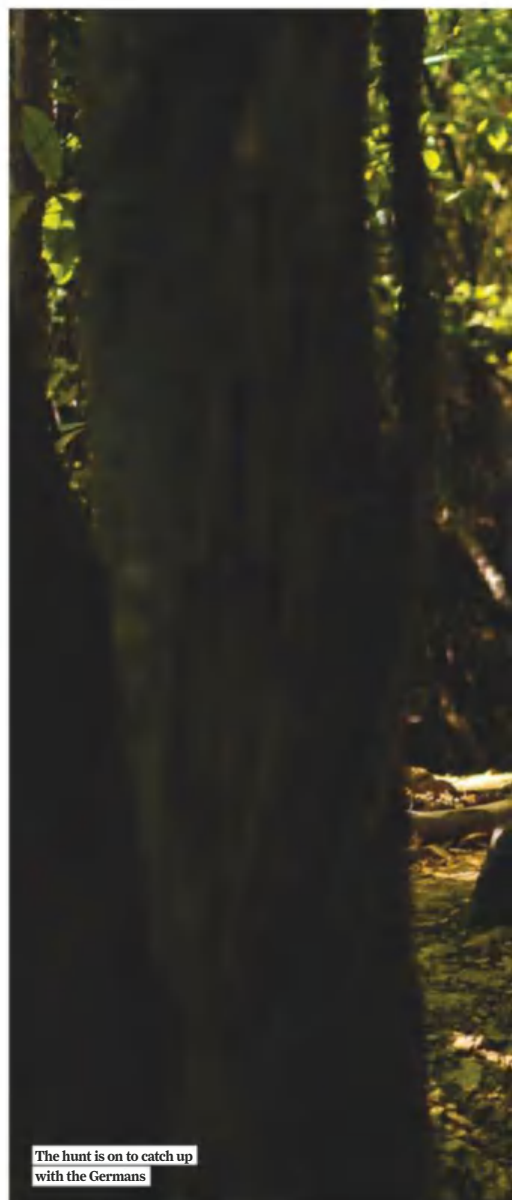
candidate, it's downhill and looks fun. We decide to give it a go.

While fun and fast with some technical sections that involve what Dan terms 'rabbit's nose', by which I think he means twitchy, it doesn't seem to be taking us any closer to town. Just as doubt starts to set in, we meet some Germans with a GPS. They confirm this isn't the trail, or direction, we're after. We now know we're going the wrong way rather than just wondering it. The next 30 minutes involve ghosting our new friends, overtaking them, and then squabbling between ourselves at the next junction until they turn up again to show us, without prompting, which way to go next. I have a suspicion if we hadn't met them we might have been in for a very long and not entirely pleasant ride or hike-a-bike back into town.

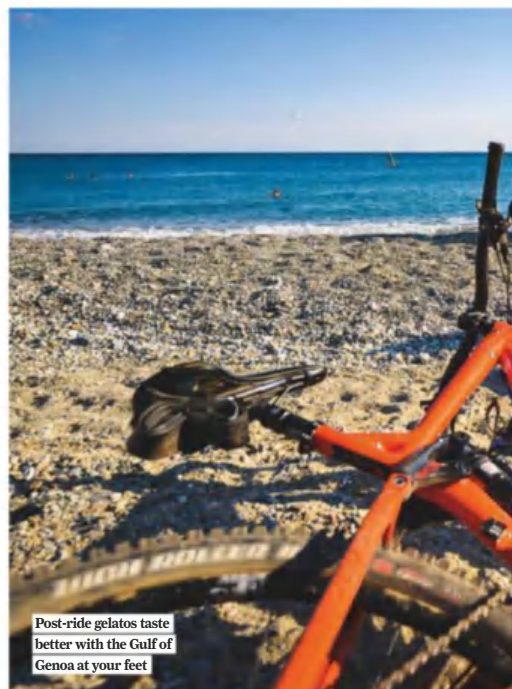
Energy levels and humour are starting to fade but through the trees we can make out the sparkle of the sea. We head towards the light, down a trail made mostly of loose rock and lined with thorn bushes. This is definitely the right trail and, even if it's not, we're beyond caring and too caught up in the ride. We end up on tarmac once again, this time next to the sea, every metre of available altitude used.

It's a short spin back into town and to the beach, via the gelateria of course. We sit on the sand with our ice creams watching the tide come in, contemplating a swim and looking forward to the evening's seafood linguine and the birras that we're sure we've earned.

In just one ride we've used local knowledge, internal compasses, signposts, ignored a badly drawn map and relied on the good grace and GPS of others to find trails from the top of the hill to the bottom. There are so many ways to discover new trails — tap into internet knowledge, hire a guide, talk to anyone who has visited. Hell, you can even just take a punt on a trail, ride it, pass it on. 🚴🏻



The hunt is on to catch up with the Germans



Post-ride gelatos taste better with the Gulf of Genoa at your feet



FACTFILE

GETTING THERE

Despite being in Italy, the most convenient airport for Finale is Nice, over the border in France. It's a 90-minute drive but, with the road hugging the coastline all the way, it's a scenic one. Just imagine you've got Audrey Hepburn next to you rather than a snoring, smelly mate to get you into the Roman Holiday spirit. If you're up for a proper road-trip, Finale is an 11-hour drive from Calais.

WHERE TO STAY

If you're happy camping, then a trip to Finale can work out pretty cheap. Three of us camped at Eurocamping Calvisio for six

nights with a large tent and a van for just less than £150: eurocampingcalvisio.it/en. If you'd rather have a solid roof over you, there are plenty of hotels in town, many of which are bike friendly and can arrange uplifts for you: bikehotelsfinaleligure.it/en

WHAT TO RIDE


There are so many trails in the area you can pick them to suit your bike. A lot of the trails, especially those used for the EWS race itself, are best enjoyed with a 140mm+ travel full-suspension bike though. It's well worth fitting DH casing tyres, the rocks in Finale take no prisoners and a walk down the hill can talk

a long time. Protection-wise, kneepads are a minimum and if you fancy doing some uplifts a full-face helmet wouldn't be out of place.

WHERE TO RIDE

The hills around Finale are full of trails. Some are official bike trails while others are a little more speculative. If you've never been to the area, hiring a guide for a day or two is well worth the money, they'll show you the highlights leaving you to fill in the gaps on the map yourself. We used Finale Freeride for our uplifts: finalefreeride.net

Make it your mission to explore and don't forget to share what you find.



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This month's routes

WHERE TO RIDE AND EXPLORE

01 MEDIUM ROUTE

HAYFIELD, PEAK DISTRICT

29.2km (18.2 miles)

Hayfield may not be the most popular trailhead for Peak District epics — Ladybower and Edale lure the most riders — but XC and cyclo-cross racing legend Nick Craig's cloverleaf route showcases all the best trails on his home turf. As we found out when we tried to keep up with him for a day back in 2010. Nick's a former Olympian and seven-time national champion, so we were expecting to suffer a fair amount of climbing, but Nick's mellowed a bit in middle age, and now likes to mix fun singletrack with lung-bursting climbs.

The first loop around Lantern Pike is a great warm-up, with mellow gradients and few technical challenges. With that out of the way, the next circuit turns up the heat with a steep, rutted climb up to New Allotments. The descent is more than ample reward, beginning with a blurry streak across open grassland, before becoming steadily more precipitous down Foxholes Clough. As good as this is, the best has been saved until last, with a fantastic descent down Elle Bank, a legendary climb past Kinder Reservoir and the classic challenge of Middle Moor to finish things off.



Fun singletrack and mellow climbs serve as a great warm-up



02 EASY ROUTE

CROOK PEAK, MENDIP HILLS

12.5km (8 miles)

Easy but sweet; and this one crosses one of the best viewpoints for miles, with the Bristol Channel in clear view to the west, and the main ridge of Blackdown and Beacon Batch to the east. It's all about the ride along the ridge really: tough climbing and sweet descending; but it doesn't work so well as an out and back, so a return leg via quiet lanes seems the best bet. The highlight? If you're a climber, then the pull onto Wavering Down; if you prefer gravity on your team, the wonderful singletrack off the side of Crook Peak. Just a shame it's over so quickly.

03 MEDIUM ROUTE

THE GAP ROAD, BRECON BEACONS

34km (21 miles)

This is the short, sweet version of the Gap Road. It's still a handful, but doable by most, even during winter when some of the surfaces on the longer version will be very soft. It's as steady a big climb as you'll ever do: first on the well-surfaced Taff Trail and then on the Gap Road itself, with a short, sharp interlude to liven things up. The drop down from the Gap is great: rough and rocky at the top, though the worst of the tough stuff can be avoided. Then full-pelt all the way down. A couple of interesting bridleways finish it off nicely, followed by a pootle along the canal.

04 HARD ROUTE

BORROWDALE, LAKE DISTRICT

27.8km (17.5 miles)

A classic rock 'n' roll Lake District classic that is just perfect for the middle of winter — though it's pretty top-notch all year round. It starts with tarmac, eventually climbing steeply above Watendlath for the first and the toughest of the day's technical descents. The water bars are a bit like Marmite: you decide. Then it's up again: this one's rewarded with a more hospitable drop, though it's still pretty techie in places — especially above Castle Craggs. More road links to the flanks of the ever-popular Cat Bells, where you sneak around the side to avoid the masses.

CROOK PEAK, MENDIP HILLS

16.5km (10 miles)

Maps created with Memory-Map © Crown copyright Ordnance Survey 100034184

EASY
ROUTE



EASY ROUTE

CROOK PEAK, MENDIP HILLS

16.5km (10 miles)

WAY TO GO

01 **START (OS182/ST421560) King's Wood car park**

Go through the gate and ride up the broad track that leads through the woods — saving the jump opportunities for the end. Keep SA out of the woods and climb brutally steeply onto Waverly Down. Keep SA into the saddle ahead and then start climbing towards Crook Peak. As the wall drops R, bear half R to follow a clear track around, rather than over, the hill and this becomes a techy singletrack descent. Drop into woods and then bear R onto a broader track that leads to gate and road.

02 **(ST384563) Road beneath Crook Peak. Distance so far: 4.4km**

Turn L to a T-junction, and bear R over the bridge over the M5. Turn R into Loxton village and ride up through the village to L turn (Hill View Road). Take this (West Mendip Way), keep R at a fork to pass a waymark. Climb to a T-junction and turn R and then L. This swings R to a T-junction, where you turn R. Cross the M5 again and turn immediately R then L at the next junction. Bear R in 1km and climb to a T-junction, where you turn L (Winscombe). Turn R in 500m then fork R onto the main road to climb steeply to the car park.

TOTAL DISTANCE: 16.5KM (10 MILES) TOTAL ASCENT: 470M (1,5420FT)

GETTING THERE

King's Wood car park is just off the A38, half way between Winscombe and Axbridge (OS182/ST421560). This is easiest reached from the north by following signs to Bristol Airport and continuing south on the A38. From the south, the A38 is easiest reached from the M5, Jn 22. Rail's not really an option.

BEST TIME TO GO

An OK year-round ride, though the wooded section at the start gets muddy and slippery after rain. It's popular walking territory so take it easy at busy times.

MAPS & GUIDEBOOKS

Memory Map V5 OS Landranger (1:50,000)

OS Landranger Series (1:50,000)
182 Weston-Super-Mare

OS Explorer Series (1:25,000) 141
Cheddar Gorge

South West Mountain Biking
by Nick Cotton (Vertebrate Publishing)

REFRESHMENTS

Take sarnies.

FACILITIES

One of the best pubs in the area, the Crown at Churchill, is close to the finish (ST446596).

Broadway House Campsite in Cheddar — once home of the Cheddar Challenge.

Youth Hostel at Cheddar,
0845 371 9730, yha.org.uk

Plenty of B&Bs in the area.

Cheddar TIC, 01934 744071

OTHER OPTIONS

You're close enough to Bristol to check out Ashton Court. Or the more obvious areas of the Mendips: Blackdown and Beacon Batch, aren't far away — see the Easy in Dec 2014 for starters.



**MEDIUM
ROUTE**

THE GAP ROAD, BRECON BEACONS

34km (21 miles)

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memory-map

PC | Mobile | Tablet | GPS

MEDIUM ROUTE

THE GAP ROAD, BRECON BEACONS

34km (21 miles)



WAY TO GO

01 **START (OS161/SO115225) Talybont-on-Usk**

Turn onto the Taff Trail (next to the White Hart) and climb up the steep concrete ramp over the canal. The track then climbs for a short distance, jinks L then R over a disused railway, and then continues in the same direction, climbing steadily the whole time. At a major fork, bear R (Taff Trail) and drop to a junction close to the dam of the Talybont Reservoir. Keep SA, still on the Taff Trail, and continue uphill for around 8km to meet the road.

02 **(SO054074) Road at Torpantau. Distance so far: 10.5km**

Turn L and climb then drop to forest tracks on your R. Turn R and ignore a track L, and continue to another fork where you keep L (Taff Trail) to continue through a succession of gates. At the road, turn R and immediately R again onto a rough track. Climb then drop into a ravine, then climb again for 3km to the Gap. Keep SA to drop for over 4km to a gate by a National Trust sign, and then down again to the road head.

03 **(SO037237) Road Head at Cwm Cynwyn. Distance so far: 24.1km**

Take the middle (wooden) gate on the R, and follow the narrow, rocky track down to a T-junction. Turn R for 1.5km to another T-junction and turn R again. Fork L after 500m and after 300m, turn L onto a BW. Follow the field edge to the stream and bear R to follow waymarks to the road. Turn R and R again into Llanfrynach. Then turn R by a telephone box, to follow the road (Taff Trail) to Pencelli. Here, get on the canal towpath to return to Talybont-on-Usk.

TOTAL DISTANCE: 34KM (21 MILES) TOTAL ASCENT: 820M (2,690FT)

GETTING THERE

Start on the Taff Trail in Talybont-on-Usk, next to the White Hart (OS161/SO115225). Park on the main street or in the car park on the other side of the canal. This is just off the A40 between Brecon and Abergavenny. From the north, use the M50 and A40 to Abergavenny. From the east, leave the M4 at Jn 24 and the A449 will get you to the same place.

BEST TIME TO GO

Good year-round trails that are mainly firm and drain well. Best avoided in really bad weather.

MAPS & GUIDEBOOKS

Memory Map V5 OS Landranger (1:50,000)

OS Landranger (1:50,000) 161 The Brecon Beacons

OS Explorer Series (1:25,000) OL 12 The Brecon Beacons National Park, Western & Central Areas

Wales Mountain Biking by Tom Hutton (Vertebrate Publishing)

REFRESHMENTS

The White Swan at Llanfrynach or the Royal Oak at Pencelli.

FACILITIES

Cafe and pubs in Talybont.

The Travellers is a superb restaurant.

B&B in the Travellers, 01874 676233.

B&B and Bunkhouse in the White Hart, 01874 676227.

Great Bunkhouse at Upper Cantref, 01874 665223.

The nearest Youth Hostel is at Brecon, 0845 371 9506.

Excellent bike shop in Abergavenny — Gateway Cycles, 01873 858519.

Brecon TIC, 01874 622485.

National Park Visitor Centre, 01874 623366.

OTHER OPTIONS

See the Bloreng Medium we ran in the July 2015 Issue.

**MEDIUM
ROUTE**

HAYFIELD, PEAK DISTRICT

29.2km (18.2 miles)

Maps created with Memory-Map © Crown copyright Ordnance Survey 100034184



MEDIUM ROUTE

HAYFIELD, PEAK DISTRICT

29.2km (18.2 miles)

WAY TO GO

01 **START (OS110/SK035869) Car park, Hayfield**

Join the Sett Valley trail heading west to Birch Vale. At the road, turn R, cross the bridge and then go sharp R onto stony BW. Climb to road, turn sharp L on road to pylon. Turn R here onto byway. Ignore RH fork and descend to Laneside Farm on rocky track. Join road and continue towards Rowarth. Just after car park on R, turn R onto BW for 100m to join road around edge of green. Turn R at T-junction and climb on road towards Knarrrs Nook. After 500m, fork R onto BW and descend to cross stream. Climb to road and bear L. Climb on road then turn R onto BW. Follow BW between stone walls past farm on R. As track turns L to another farm go SA through field around Lantern Pike. Descend on Pennine BW to meet earlier road junction. Go SA and descend to road.

02 **(SK020869) Birch Vale. Distance so far: 11.2km**

Turn L on road, then look for singletrack climb on R just before houses. Cross road to climb past quarry. After 2km, where road meets track from R, turn L onto BW and climb to New Allotments. Turn L at crossroads on BW between stone wall. Descend alongside spine of hill past Ollersett, then turn sharp R onto singletrack beside stone wall. Descend through wood to A624. Carefully cross A624, then turn R at T-junction. Turn L through Highgate Head farm on BW and follow diagonally through field to eastern corner. Descend through forest and turn L to descend to stream. Head into Hayfield and turn R, then R again to head back out along valley on opposite side. Continue on road to Kinder Reservoir.

03 **(SK053882) Kinder Reservoir. Distance so far: 23.2km**

Bear L onto steep cobbled climb and switchback onto Middle Moor. Follow BW across wooden bridge, past shooting cabin, and follow singletrack through heather to road. Turn about face at road and retrace steps back to shooting cabin. Turn R at fingerpost and join BW through six gates back to road. Turn R onto road back into Hayfield. Just after pub, turn R to cross A624 and back into main car park.

TOTAL DISTANCE: 29.2KM (18.2 MILES) TOTAL ASCENT: 1,004M (3,294FT)

GETTING THERE

By road, Hayfield is off the A624, which can be reached by the A6 from Chapel-en-le-Frith or off the A57 (Snake Pass) from Glossop. To find out more about the trails when you arrive, go to the The Sett Valley Trail Information Centre on Station Road, Hayfield, SK22 2ES. The nearest railway station is Chinley, which is four miles away, northernrail.org.

BEST TIME TO GO

The gritstone trails around Hayfield are reasonably well-drained, but are probably best avoided after really long periods of wet weather.

MAPS & GUIDEBOOKS

Memory Map V5 OS Landranger (1:50,000)

OS Landranger 110 (1:50,000) Sheffield and Huddersfield

OS Explorer OL1 (1:25,000) The Peak District

REFRESHMENTS

Rosie's Tea and Coffee Rooms on Kinder Road (rosiesinhayfield.com), or for a post-ride pub you've got two options: the Packhorse or Nick's favourite, the spit and sawdust of The Sportsman (kindersportsman.co.uk).

FACILITIES

The Pack Horse Inn in nearby New Mills (not the Hayfield one) looks very nice and not outrageously expensive, packhorseinn.co.uk

Sett Valley cycles, New Mills, 01663 742629, settvalleycycles.co.uk

High Peak Cycles, Glossop, 01457 861535, highpeakcycles.co.uk



HARD ROUTE

BORROWDALE, LAKE DISTRICT

27.8km (17.5 miles)

Maps created with Memory-Map © Crown copyright Ordnance Survey 100034184



HARD ROUTE

BORROWDALE, LAKE DISTRICT

27.8km (17.5 miles)



WAY TO GO

01 **START (OS90/NY266235) Otley Rd Car Park, Keswick**

Turn R onto the main road and continue to Main St, where you turn R to the junction with Heads Rd. Turn L into this, and follow it around town to a roundabout. Turn R onto the Borrowdale Road and follow it for 2.5km to a L fork (Watendlath). Follow this to the road end at Watendlath, and turn R over the bridge.

02 **(NY275163) Watendlath. Distance so far: 8.5km**

Fork R onto a stony BW, and climb steeply then drop into Borrowdale — keeping R to go through a gate about halfway down. Keep SA on tarmac into Rothwaite village and turn L to ride out again. Keep SA for 2km to Seatoller, and continue through the village and steeply up the Honister Pass. Cross a cattle grid after 1.2km and as the road bends L, turn sharp R onto a BW that almost runs parallel to the road.

03 **(NY235138) BW Junction on Honister Pass. Distance so far: 14.4km**

Keep SA through a gate, and then, after 400m, as you approach a copse on your R, fork L (easy to miss) onto a singletrack BW (well-hidden waymark on the L). Climb to a gate and keep SA on undulating singletrack, eventually dropping steeply to Castle Crag. Keep SA into the wood, and bear L at the river to follow a drive to a road. Bear R into Grange.

04 **(NY252174) Grange. Distance so far: 18.9km**

Turn L in the village and then turn L, after 1.2km, onto a track marked as a footpath that turns immediately into a BW. Climb steeply on a rough track and then fork R at the top to follow a singletrack BW that follows the wall. Stay on this around the hill and down to the road. Turn L and immediately L again, to follow more BW around the hillside. Drop to the road again and turn L and then R, down a steep hill. Turn R at the next junction and follow the road into Portinscale. Turn R (Footpath to Keswick) to cross the river to the B5288. Turn R and follow this back into town.

TOTAL DISTANCE: 27.8KM (17.5 MILES) TOTAL ASCENT: 940M (3,084FT)

GETTING THERE

The description starts from the long stay car park in Keswick, in Otley Rd. The town is just off the A66, 15 miles west of Jn 40 of the M6, at Penrith. Rail's not really an option.

BEST TIME TO GO

Definitely year-round trails and it doesn't climb too high, so isn't a huge problem with bad weather. Note: much of the route is popular with walkers, especially the final section on Cat Bells, so plan your ride accordingly.

MAPS & GUIDEBOOKS

Memory Map V5 OS Landranger (1:50,000)

OS Landranger Series (1:50,000)
90 Penrith & Keswick

OS Explorer Series (1:25,000) OL 4
The English Lakes — North-Western

Harvey Superwalker (1:25,000)
Lakeland North

Lake District Mountain Bike Routes by Tom Hutton (Out There Guides)

REFRESHMENTS

Tea shop central here — try Watendlath, Roswathie or Sea Toller, or the best bet is Grange, near the end. Pubs in Roswathie and Sea Toller.

FACILITIES

Keswick has all the facilities you could ask for.

The nearest Youth Hostel is Keswick, 0845 371 9746.

Bike spares and hire at Keswick Mountain Bikes, 017687 73355.

For other options, check out the TIC.

Keswick TIC, 017687 71645.



FEATURE

TRAIL
CENTRE
FOCUS

PATH OF ENLIGHTENMENT

With the remnants of ideas and experiments, both good and bad, to be found at every turn, riding in Mabie Forest is like taking a tour through a trail-building laboratory

Words and photos: Andy McCandlish

In association with



SPECIALIZED





Cake mix is the secret ingredient in Descender Bender's tasty half-pipe



Trails have been narrowed by nature into singletrack ribbons




The Ridge is a helter-skelter descent of fast, flowing turns



THIS ISN'T SOMETHING
THAT COULD BE
PLANNED; THIS IS ART
NOT CONSTRUCTION

There is no more rewarding experience than riding a trail with its builder. As you pedal you learn how every jink, berm and rise has a reason to be there. It's a reminder that these aren't routes that have evolved, taking the natural line of least resistance through the terrain over decades of experimentation, they are designed and built specifically to emulate that process in only a few weeks, using the eye of one man and his team.

If they are good, the bike sings. It surges along as each turn and drop falls into place, supporting your tyres in sweeping bends and catching you when sudden rises in the trail throw you skyward. It flows with speed at some points and challenges your technical ability in others, smoothly transitioning between the two. Ask any trail-builder, and they'll tell you this isn't something that could be planned in the office to the last millimetre; rather, it evolves with each shovel-load tossed over your shoulder, bending continuously to the restrictions of terrain, drainage and budget. This is art, not construction.

As a trail centre, Mable predated the 7Stanes, and consequently it stands as a living, breathing demonstration of how trail-builders have honed their eye for a line and developed their skill with a shovel. Generations of trails exist side-by-side, some that work well and have been absorbed into the trail system, others that have been phased-out long ago and only survive as a grassy, overgrown cutting into the trees you would barely notice without the benefit of a local eye. 



Rough with the smooth:
exposed bedrock breaks
up the flow

TRAIL
CENTRE
FOCUS

ABOUT THE SERIES

Trail centres were invented right here in the UK. No other country has such an extensive network of artfully crafted trails, from Glentworth in the borders of Scotland down to Queen Elizabeth Country Park in the heart of the South Downs. And with no two trail centres alike, we're making it our mission to bring you the best of manmade singletrack in the country. From the newest trails that flow like water, to the old, rocky legacies of the 90s, every trail and trail centre has a story to tell. There's a broad depth of quality to be enjoyed by everyone, whether you're after a quick half-hour fix or an all-day ride.



Clive rails another perfect berm



Mable blazed the woodwork trail for the 7Stanes



Natural trails link up with
7Stanes creations for the
best of both worlds



Handmade trails are
built for speed

RIDE A SECTION OF WOODWORK ANYWHERE IN SCOTLAND AND CHANCES ARE THE DESIGN WAS TRIED-AND-TESTED IN MABIE

eye of Forestry Commission Scotland, way back in the mid-Nineties, the locals had discovered Mabie and were riding lines through the mix of plantation and deciduous trees. Attracted by the gradients and good quality soil, the scene here took off in a big way, eventually gaining structure and legitimacy when one of the guys, Rik Allsop, decided to quit his job and start a bike shop at the foot of the hill. The result was Rik's Red Route, a loop of incredible trails, way ahead of its time, mainly funded by Rik and his shop, and boosted by plenty of volunteer manpower.

With the advent of the 7Stanes project, the Forestry Commission stepped in, adopting the trails and pledging to develop them further. Local lad Andy was working in Rik's Bike Shed at the time, until FC offered him a job, a budget, a workforce of seven men and the free reign to continue Rik's good work. For an avid trail builder, it was like winning the lottery. Since then, the trails have continually developed, and some sections are now in their fifth iteration.

THE RIDGE

As we hit the top of The Ridge, we jump off to soak up what could have been a spectacular view, but was instead the inside of a particularly soupy mist rolling in off the Solway Firth. Moisture clings to the rocks as we scramble over a crumbling drystone wall to check out what is left of the original Ridge trail, now just a slightly overgrown parting of the heather.

It still runs parallel to the 7Stanes construction on the opposite side of the wall, but the difference couldn't be starker. Only inches wide, it picks its way along a path with a history longer than any local's memory, that's slowly being reclaimed in its dotage by Old Mother Mabie. Beautiful and appealing in its own way, a step back over the wall brings us into another decade.

Bang up-to-date, the trail literally launches us off the summit and sweeps us forward. We grimly try to hold onto Clive's wheel — a waste of effort if ever there was one — and let the trail take over. Leaning deeply into sweeping bends, the silence of the mist is broken by the roar of the wind; jumps and flat-out sections generate speed and acceleration in a way that could never have been achieved on the original path without a madman at the controls.

Even though these are very modern trails, Mabie is a trail centre that has grown comfortable in its own skin, with the wider contemporary trail long since contracting into a very appealing looking singletrack.

"You can't build trail this narrow," Andy points out when we finally pull up to grab a breath. "this trail was far wider when we built it, but people choose the line over time and everything else just grew over." Natural selection at work; the better, flowing line stays, the rest reverts back to nature.

The pause allows us to look west over toward the old Dark Side. After a trip to Canada in the early Noughties, Andy came back with an inevitable enthusiasm for North Shore woodwork and immediately got to work, feverishly building a black-graded pier of raised timber.

"We wanted to build a black route on the hill, but it was very boggy, so woodwork was the perfect answer," Andy recalls as he scans the area. "There is every type of timber construction out there, and this is where we learned to do it properly. From our original Heath Robinson approach, we developed standards that now apply across the whole Forestry trail network. And it all started here." Opened in 2004, the Dark Side closed a few years back, a victim of its very challenging nature.

"It was a nightmare to keep the vegetation down, and if you didn't it became very slippery. We had constant maintenance for only the few

For this reason, it has been described, by those in the know, as a nursery for trail-building; where features and techniques are trialled before being rolled out to the wider 7Stanes network. Ride a section of woodwork anywhere in Scotland, for example, and chances are the design was tried and tested in Mabie. Consequently, nowhere is the development of the trail-building art so clear to follow than here.

A very civilised coffee in the tranquil, wood-panelled surrounds of Mabie House Hotel is the start of my ride out with Andy Hopkins, chief trail-builder in the area and the man responsible for the 7Stanes Mabie trails. We're also joined by Clive Forth, who moved to the area 10 years ago specifically for the mountain biking, and to run his skills company MTBSkills.co.uk. He's coming out to show us how to really ride the Mabie trails. And because he'll grab any excuse to go for a ride.

Andy gives me a potted history of the area as we cruise up the gentle red trail climb. Long before the 7Stanes were even a twinkle in the



This smooth stretch is safe even for danger-magnet Andy

hundred riders that were using it." With a limited budget, the tough decision was made to close it, but lessons had been learned.

A hop and skip through the glorious mix of deciduous and conifer plantation that is a signature of Mabie, brings us to Descender Bender. Without pausing, we dive in and, as I follow Andy, he gives it full beans and disappears over a rise. I prepare to suck up the rise, and scan ahead for the next corner, but my eye is immediately drawn to a wheel. It's upside down. And closely followed by a leg. Then the sole of a shoe sweeping across the sky. A crackle of snapping ferns and small bushes is drowned out by the honk of my brakes being hastily applied. Then the laughter starts.

Once a trail-builder, always a trail-builder; Andy admits he was distracted — at full speed — by a bit of the trail surface. He looked down, he looked up, and then hit a tree stump that launched him out over the edge.

TAKING THE CAKE

Following Andy makes it obvious why he was the perfect man to throw in at the deep end when trail-building was in its embryonic years. When no one really knew how it would work out, what was needed was a human guinea pig. Someone with the nerve to just jump in and try, to scrape that first digger bucket and give it a whirl. No one really knew about flow in those early days, or what would truly make a great trail, but someone needed to bull on and make it happen so the learning process could begin.

Chasing him down a trail, he clearly rides his bike the same way — he may not have a polished technique, but he has the raw nerve in spades to just charge through. The result is a fast rider, but one who is nerve-racking to ride behind, as I just wait for the next near miss. Clive, a man of measured skill, just shakes his head with a knowing smile when Andy takes off again, scratches his brakes erratically and nearly launches off a berm into oblivion. He has been riding with Andy a long time.

At an innocuous section of fast trail, we stop again to look at cake mix. Yes, cake mix. Another of Andy's developments, this particular recipe is a 50/50 mix of aggregate and clay subsoil, compacted and formed into trail features like



Clive leads as Descender Bender's rollercoaster picks up speed

berms, jumps and tabletops. Incredibly resilient, it forms the basis of many a trail feature countrywide these days.

"We even experimented with mixing cement into the soil to support slopes like this," he kicked the steep berm, "but they just crumbled and looked horrendous eventually so we needed to look for something else if we wanted these extreme features. The cake mix is hardwearing, but even when it does go all you need is a visit with the digger to reform it and you are back on track."


The result here is an incredibly hardwearing and fun descent, with cutting-edge turns that give me the confidence to lean right over in the knowledge I will be supported all the way to the limit. And the beauty is, that using this organic material has allowed nature to grow back where it can, reinforcing Mabie's timeless feel.

The icing on the cake, as it were, is a half-pipe constructed completely of the miracle mix, "and a right sticky mix at that," as Andy points out. No wonder — the sides top out almost vertical and it is clear that the standard stone and whin dust

construction would only result in a pile of rubble at the bottom. Clive launches off the top of each of the three turns, using momentum generated solely by Andy's carefully calculated gradients. It is a work of art, nothing less.

As we finally roll back into Mabie House Hotel for a final coffee, it is almost dark. I can't begin to think where the day has gone, only that it has passed in a flash of great riding and good chat.

"Trail-building is a balance of fun and sustainability," Andy muses as we sit down, "but to me, sustainability is less about the trail itself, and more about how long you are going to have people coming back to ride it. If you groom the trail to perfection, sanitising it to give a 20-year lifespan, no one is going to ride it." He taps his teaspoon to make a point. "Better a trail wears out through use, than be bombproof but not enjoyable."

Right there is the attitude that has seen Mabie stay at the forefront of trail design for two decades. Generations of trails that have worked and not worked, sit side-by-side, representing a colourful storyline of how the trail-building art was born. 



SPECIALIZED



Taking stock by the side of a loch

MABIE FOREST

THE TRAILS

- Mabie Skills Area
- **GREEN** Big Views
Loop 8km, 1-2 hours
- **BLUE** Woodhead
Loop 10km, 1-2 hours
- **RED** Phoenix Trail
19km 1.5-2.5 hours

PICK OF THE TRAILS

The Phoenix is a mix of fast and furious modern trail, combined with the rooty and natural feel of the older hand-cut stuff

SLEEPING AND EATING

Right at the trailhead there is a great mix of accommodation, and you won't have to go far to find your perfect bed for the night, whatever your budget. Mabie House Hotel has excellent rooms, but also its own camping pods in the grounds, which means you can get up, throw a leg over your bike and hit the trail straight away (mabiehousehotel.co.uk). Marthrown on Mabie is further into the forest and has teepees, yurts, camping and bunkhouse accommodation — you can even climb into the hot tub and look at the stars after a hard day (marthrownofmabie.com).

FIXING YOUR BIKE

The bike shop on site has closed for now but there is a long-term plan to rebuild it. The nearest shops for now would be in Dumfries: DG2 Wheels (dg2wheels.co.uk) or G&G Cycle Centre (01387 259483) both have workshops with plenty of spares.

WHAT TO RIDE

There are a wide variety of trails in Mabie, linked by the theme of flow. For that reason you could get a lot of fun out of a hardtail, swooping the berms and hammering the smooth singletrack climbs. At most, a short-travel full-suss would keep you right, and would be handy if you are heading onto the unofficial trails.

BEST OF THE REST

Almost without exception, local riders use far more of the forest than just the 7Stanes trails. Ridden-in lines riddle the forest, some dating back to pre-7Stanes altogether, so they tend to stitch together rides that dip in and out of both. Hook up with a local, or just keep your eyes peeled on your way round to spice up a longer visit. Of course the excellent Dalbeattie trail is only a short drive down the road too, so this area has enough to hold your interest for more than just a few days.

CUTTING-EDGE
TURNS GIVE ME THE
CONFIDENCE TO
LEAN RIGHT OVER



North Shore sections allow the Dark Side to raise its game

[CAN'T] GET MORE OUT OF A SINGLE CROWN.
LA THIVILE, ITALY



LYRIK IS BACK. THE ALL NEW. ALL DAY. EVERYTHING FORK. PROVE CAN'T WRONG.



MOUNTAIN BIKE INDEX

mbr NEXT MONTH



Do-it-all trail bikes

27.5IN RIPPERS FROM GHOST, GT AND WHYTE ON TEST

FIRST RIDES

- Nukeproof Mega
- Evil The Following
- VooDoo Maji

STAY DRY THIS WINTER

Packable waterproofs
face the rain test

PLUS

CAN YOU DIG IT?

mbr joins a dig day
at Stainburn

NEW ISSUE ON SALE WEDS DECEMBER 16



THE RACER'S EDGE

FAST DESCENDING

*Steep and techy or fast and flowy:
gain maximum speed on any
descent, with Kenta Gallagher*

Words and photos: Roo Fowler

Speed is addictive, and it plays a huge part in what makes mountain biking so much fun. Flying down a piece of singletrack, narrowly avoiding trees, with the roar of the wind all around is one of those experiences that's unique to mountain biking, and one that never fails to generate a smile. And if you really want to maximise those smiles-per-mile, who better to seek advice from than someone

who has raced both cross-country and downhill at the highest level? Once again, we've enlisted the help of all-rounder Kenta Gallagher, a man who calls speed his best friend.

What do we mean by fast descending? In this context it can apply to steep, technical terrain ridden at pace, as well as flatter trails taken at genuinely eye-watering speeds. On steeper technical sections, the absolute speed, in terms of mph, is never actually that fast. But watch a good

rider hit a rough section of trail and the speeds are definitely high relative to the terrain.

On gentler gradients, as long as the trail is smooth, you can hit and maintain high speeds with surprisingly little effort, it doesn't take much gradient at all before you're nudging 30mph just inches from trees. This month we're going to look at the preparation and processes needed to really attack both scenarios and ride the terrain to its maximum speed.

YOUR COACH

Kenta Gallagher started out cross-country racing, taking multiple national titles and finishing inside the top 10 at World Cups. Last season he switched to racing downhill as a privateer, with support from Hope, local garage Kenny's Autos and his friend Sandy Rogers. This year at the Lenzerheide World Cup he showed his potential, seeding 17th and placing 41st.

ABOUT KENTA

Trail bike: Trek Remedy
From: Inverness, Scotland
Age: 23



PREPARE

■ **BREATHING** If you're about to roll into a steep and technical section, the last thing you want is to be out of breath. You're going to need to be focused and alert to ride rough stuff fast, so make sure you have regained your breath and are ready for what's ahead.

When it comes to flatter trails, being out of breath tends to just mean you'll pedal less and go slower, so recover beforehand and you'll be able to build up and maintain speed for longer.

■ **LOOK** As ever, keeping your eyes open and knowing where and when you should be looking every step of the way plays a massive part in determining your speed. However, unlike climbs, descents fall away from you, which means looking further ahead will come a bit more naturally, but the gradient can hide what's ahead too. On steeper trails, pause just before dropping in to give yourself a chance to look at the potential lines and what's the first obstacle your wheels are going to encounter.

At least on flatter trails, less of the trail should be obscured. So, from the off, you can see how much space there is to pedal up to speed, and hopefully spot the first corner and work out whether it's going to require any braking.

■ **ATTITUDE** It's incredible how much a change of mental attitude can alter how we ride. If you drop into a trail thinking "pedal everywhere possible" you may end up with a vastly different time compared to dropping into the same trail thinking "carry

speed and pump". Decide beforehand how you're going to tackle the trail ahead; when it's steep, deciding to just "let off the brakes" might not be the smartest move. Instead, look at the section and decide what's appropriate. Often it's better to be slow and controlled through a turn to maximise speed on the exit.

More gradual trails will have a different approach. Examples could be: "take the shortest line through every corner"; or "pedal hard on every straight". Of course, in reality you often combine various approaches, but having a goal at the forefront of your mind will always influence your approach.

■ **GEAR** Steep sections rarely require pedalling, but to make sure you don't grind to a halt when the gradient runs out, select a gear that's not at the extremes of the cassette range.

Flatter, faster trails usually require you to build up the speed yourself, so start in a relatively low gear that's easy to accelerate.

■ **SADDLE** When things get steep, you want your saddle as far out of the way as possible. Even if you don't have a dropper post, slam that seat!

Flatter trails may not require any saddle drop at all, but often lowering it by an inch or two is ideal. If there are any high-speed compressions, jumps or drops, you may want to get it a right out of the way to avoid getting tangled up.

Once you've set the bike, and yourself, for the descent, point the wheels down and attack that trail.

SORT YOUR BODY POSITION

FLAT AND FAST

This is your standard 'attack' body position — your knees and elbows should be slightly bent ready to extend or compress as necessary, and your weight should sit centrally over the bike. By this we mean, if you were to put bathroom scales under each wheel, they should register the same weight. Lastly your head should be up, looking ahead ready to spot the next turn coming up



STEEP AND TECHY

A change in gradient inevitably means a change in weight balance between the wheels. Point a bike down a hill, but remain in the same body position, and the front wheel will have more weight on it. To counteract this, straighten your arms and lower your hips back behind the saddle, towards the rear wheel. Drop your heels and force the rear wheel into the ground to help with traction and braking.





Eye up! Train that gaze to look way down the trail



WATCH THE VIDEO

Let Kenta show you how it's done — just go to po.st/descents

ATTACK

■ **LOOK** You should never look at the trail immediately in front of your wheel! On steeper sections of trail, you should be processing the trail and picking out the closest obstacle — whether it's a stump, rock, root or corner etc. Decide what line you're going to take over/around it, then move onto the next obstacle. Ideally you want to be working two or three obstacles ahead of yourself, so by the time you've got to the first obstacle you're already looking ahead for future trouble. If there's time, it's always worth scanning ahead a little further to see if there's anything that might catch you out, like a tight turn that you'll need to slow down for. Otherwise, keep those eyes fixed a few obstacles ahead, and focus on where you want to go, not at what you want to avoid.

Flatter, faster trails require you to look much further ahead than on steeper trails; so tens of metres rather than just a few metres. Obstacles tend to be fewer and farther between, but easy to miss because of the speed you carry. You'll also need to concentrate on your intended line around corners.

■ **BODY** As a general rule, the steeper the trail, the further off the back of the bike you need to be. Above all else, allow the bike to move around below you — let your arms and legs bend to work in tandem with the suspension, rather than fighting against it.

■ **PEDAL** It's usually faster to freewheel on steeper stuff, not to mention safer if you are riding flats and the section is rough. Instead, focus that energy on absorbing impacts, putting the tyres where you want them and keeping your eyes open and well ahead.

Slacker gradients will often require a fair amount of pedalling, but after the initial acceleration, the pedal strokes are more about maintaining speed rather than increasing it. Be wary of selecting too hard a gear; if a trail is flowy and fast you can often be lulled into selecting smaller and smaller cogs, but all it takes is a little rise and your legs will lose cadence, you'll have to back off and shift gear.

KENTA'S TOP TIPS



Slam into a berm as an alternative braking technique

■ **Squaring off turns**, by cutting the entry, can mean losing speed. Usually this is a bad thing, but in some situations it can be beneficial. If it's essential to slow down to get around a corner, say on a steeper section, why waste time braking beforehand when you can roll in with extra speed and scrub it off at the same time as hitting the turn without even touching the brakes.

■ **Try to brake when it's the only action going on.** If you do need to brake before a corner or obstacle, it's often far better

to do it while the tyres are in full contact with the ground — if you're cornering or rolling over roots at the same time, you may be asking too much of them and they could slide out underneath you.

■ **Run harder tyre pressures:** If you find yourself holding back from rattling through a technical section at full speed, it could be because you are thinking about the risk of puncturing. Try running harder tyre pressures than usual and you'll find you can hit stuff harder and faster.

■ **Inches matter** when it comes to line choice: it's easy to think of different lines being feet apart, but your tyres are only a couple of inches wide. Ride accurately, and you can take far smoother lines by just moving an inch to the left or an inch to the right.



Keep out of the rough and maintain your speed

Shorten and bleed a Reverb hose

Stop your hose flapping or just keep your seatpost in full working order with our RockShox Reverb maintenance guide

Dropper posts are a game-changing innovation in mountain biking and the RockShox Reverb remains arguably the best and most popular. A regular bleed is recommended to keep it running smoothly, but unlike a brake — which should be done every six-months or so to flush out moisture — you only really need to open the guts of your Reverb once a year. Of course, if the action is slow, the speed adjustment doesn't work, or the post won't move, that service interval doesn't apply and it's time to break out the tools.

It's also good practice to have the right length hose for your seatpost. If it's too long it will flap around and you run the risk of catching it on something and damaging it.

If you bought the post aftermarket it will come with a bleed kit, however not all manufacturers chose to include them with a full bike, so you may still have to splash out. Expect to pay around £15 or so for the kit.

Don't give in to temptation and just use brake fluid to bleed the post. DOT fluid used in brakes will attack the seals in the Reverb, leading to some expensive problems, and this is also the reason why different syringes are supplied with the Reverb bleed kit.

Reverb fluid is less corrosive and at a lower pressure than brake fluid so the chances of it squirting in your eye and hurting you are much lower, but you should still wear glasses and latex gloves for protection.

The only other thing you may need is a hose-cutting tool, which can be picked up for under £6.

FACTFILE

■ **TIME TAKEN**
30 minutes

■ **DIFFICULTY LEVEL**

Moderate

■ **TOOLS REQUIRED**

Rockshox Reverb Bleed Kit • High quality hose cutting tool • 6mm spanner • 7mm spanner • T10 Torx • T25 Torx • Torque wrench

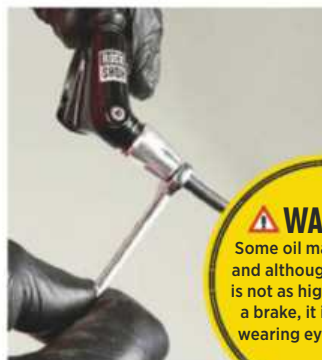
YOUR EXPERT

DANIE LATEGAN

Danie is the workshop supervisor at the SRAM tech centre, making him an expert in all things RockShox, Avid and SRAM. He may or may not wear those latex gloves outside of work.



01 Set the seatpost to its highest point and remove the remote from the handlebar using a T25 Torx wrench. Turn the speed adjuster all the way in — the opposite direction to the arrow.



WARNING
Some oil may come out, and although the system is not as high pressure as a brake, it is still worth wearing eye protection

02 Disconnect the remote barb using a 7mm spanner. Cover the end of the hose with a tissue. Disconnect the inside of the remote barb with a T10 Torx key. Alternatively, just unscrew the entire remote, barb and all, from the end of the hose.



TOP TIP

If you cut it too short you'll have to buy a new hose for £10. Measure twice, cut once!

03 Measure the length of the hose. Ensure that it will pass through any cable routing, that all the curves in the hose are smooth, and that there is enough cable for the bars to be rotated 90 degrees in either direction.

04 Cut the hose to length using a hose-cutting tool. A sharp Stanley knife will do, but is not recommended, as you must make sure the cut is flush or you will not be able to get the barb to sit straight.





05 Insert the remote barb and re-attach it to the speed adjuster. You will now need to perform a full system bleed.



06 Fill both syringes with roughly 10mm of Reverb fluid each, and ensure there is no air in them.



09 With the seatpost higher than the remote, take out the syringe from the seatpost end and re-insert the bleed screw.



TOP TIP

Keep a few rags or kitchen roll and a hand spray filled with water to hand here for mopping up fluid

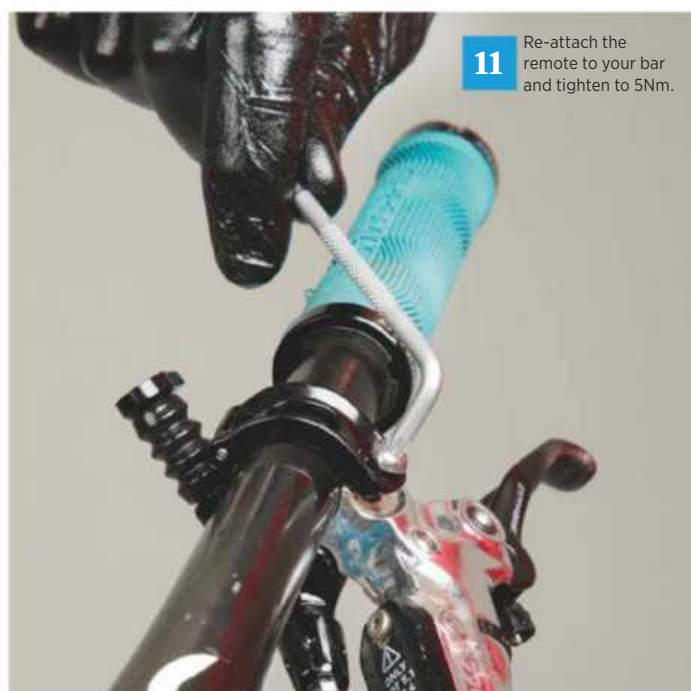
07 Remove both bleed screws with a T10 Torx wrench and attach the syringes, hand tight. If you have not just replaced your hose, a small bit of fluid will come out.



10 With the syringe still attached, pump the remote until no more air bubbles come out, then push it all the way in. Push down on the syringe until the remote comes back out and then quickly remove the syringe and reinsert the bleed screw.



08 Push the fluid from the seat post end to the remote end and then back again until no air comes out.



11 Re-attach the remote to your bar and tighten to 5Nm.

Tested

DVO DIAMOND FORK

£799

SPECIFICATION Weight: 2,158g • Travel: 130-160mm • Options, 27.5in and 29in • Colours: green or black • Contact: silverfish-uk.com

USA-based suspension brand DVO (Developed Suspension) offers a range of three products — the Emerald dual-crown fork, the Jade coil shock and a 160mm travel single-crown fork called the Diamond.

Available in 27.5in and 29in wheel sizes, the Diamond's travel is adjustable in 10mm increments from 130mm to 160mm, using clip-in spacers. To keep the weight down, it sports tapered aluminium stanchions, a hollow-forged crown and a pared down 15mm thru-axle. There's no shock pump or star nut included, but you do get a mini fender, which bolts to the back of the fork brace. It keeps mud off the seals, but it's not long enough to be effective in UK winter conditions.

Like Fox's FIT system and RockShox's Charger unit, the Diamond uses a bladder cartridge damper. It's fully sealed and can be removed quickly for tuning and servicing, and allows for oil displacement. The fork has independent high and low-speed compression adjustment in addition to rebound, the former via the two dials on top of the right leg. Low-speed has six pre-set positions and it's relatively easy to flick the lever on the go if you want to stiffen the fork for climbing. The black high-speed adjuster is underneath, it has around 24 clicks of adjustment, but unfortunately it seized solid twice during testing.

In the other leg is the spring cartridge, which combines a main air spring with a coil negative. This negative spring can be pre-loaded using DVO's Off-The-Top (OTT) adjuster, which alters the initial sensitivity of the fork and lets you play with the small bump ride.

DVO doesn't currently offer volume reducers for the Diamond, but you can increase the progression by introducing a small amount of oil to the air chamber. Alternatively, you could get a similar result by increasing air pressure and then



OTT pre-loads the negative spring for extra sensitivity

dialling in more OTT.

The big negative with having both an air spring cartridge and a damping cartridge is that it adds weight — the 27.5in Diamond is nearly 300g heavier than the equivalent RockShox Pike! It also takes a little longer to set-up, and even after a month riding I was still fiddling with the adjusters. Some of this fettling is because the compression settings are a little on the firm side — the fork just didn't feel as smooth as a Pike or Fox 36 over roots and square edges — but also because adding more OTT changes the ride height, meaning I vacillated between 150mm and 160mm.

At £800 the Diamond is over £100 cheaper than a Fox 36 and only marginally more than a RockShox Pike, but it's heavier than both. It lacks the Pike's simple set-up and is not as stiff as the Fox 36, but it has improved ride sensitivity courtesy of the excellent OTT feature. It is comparable in quality and has easy-to-understand features; you just need to persevere with set-up if you want to find the sweet spot.

Paul Burwell



YOUR TESTERS



PAUL BURWELL

Just upgraded his bike with Shimano Di2. Didn't help, still getting dropped by his nine-year-old daughter on the climbs



DADDY MILNER

Looking a bit bleary eyed this month, dirty kit and all the nappies piling up. Already prepping the hand-me-down Enduro



JAMIE DADLOW

New dad Darlow, killer commute is a cause for concern along with the skinny trail saddle he had to test this month. Ouch!



AL VINES

mbr's long-time fettler and bike fixer. Finally jumped on the 29er bang wagon, just needs to get out more



BEN SMITH

Fitted a matching blue mudguard to his Five: we're convinced he has OCD... or blue's his fave colour and he's really five years old



HOPE DROPPER SEAT CLAMP

£25

SPECIFICATION Weight: 36g • Sizes: 34.9 and 36.4mm • Contact: hopetech.com

Hope's Dropper Seat Clamp is designed for externally routed dropper posts. It has a tiny guide bolted to the side to keep the excess hose/cable close to the frame when the post is lowered, preventing it from flapping and rubbing your paint.

I tested it with a RockShox Reverb dropper.

Unfortunately, due to the way the hose exits the head of the Reverb, and the limited adjustment of the guide, there were issues with the hose kinking. Turning the clamp 180° allowed me to position the guide further back, which cured

the problem but it didn't look particularly sleek.

There are other seat clamps on the market designed for droppers — Specialized's Command Post seat collar with built-in guide, for one. It's cheaper than the Hope unit, but you do have to

disconnect the cable (hose) to route it, while

the Hope guide is detachable. The Hope is also lighter, comes in more colours and you can remove the guide if you eventually upgrade to stealth routing.

Paul Burwell



RENTHAL ULTRA TACKY GRIPS

£24.99

SPECIFICATION Weight: 113g • Black only • Contact: ison-distribution.com

I don't wear gloves, so I'm constantly looking for a grip that works well when it's both wet and muddy in winter and hot and sweaty in summer... and I think I've just found it.

Renthal's new Ultra Tacky lock-on is made from a special rubber that provides an almost adhesive grip surface — it's so tacky that your hands are almost stuck to the handlebars. An added benefit of this softer rubber is there's more give in the surface, so more cushioning. It also compresses more, which makes it thinner when riding. The rubber does lose some of its stickiness as it gets dirty or dusty, but to re-activate the rubber all you have to do is wash it with clean water.

The grip features twin aluminium collars, but unlike an ODI Lock-On grip, which is made of separate and replaceable components, the clamps on the Ultra Tacky are fixed permanently to the central core. There's no movement between the clamps and the cartridge (the

centre part), but once the rubber is worn out you do have to throw the whole lot away.

The grip surface gets a diamond knurl pattern, and there's an even transition from the rubber to the clamps. I like the fact that all the bolts face backwards — they're easier to tighten — and snap-fit end caps stop dirt plugging the bar.

If you've ever used Maxxis Super Tacky tyres, you'll know soft rubber wears out quickly, and after two months the Renthals are already sporting a few nicks and cuts.

That said, I'm happy to take a hit on durability for the increase in traction and feel.

If you ride gloveless, these are the best out there.

Paul Burwell



SCORES ON THE DOORS

What mbr ratings mean
Our grading system explained



1-4 Something's wrong. It's rare, but sometimes a product will have a design flaw or some other weakness that means we can't recommend it. Steer clear.



5-6 OK — one or two faults but it has potential.



7 Good — worth considering.



8 Very good — for the money, we'd buy it.



9 Excellent — a slight mod or two and it might be perfect.



10 Simply the best — we couldn't fault it.



MADISON FLO WOMEN'S LONG-SLEEVE JERSEY

£34.99

SPECIFICATION: Colour: black • Sizes: 8-16 • Contact: madison.co.uk

This is a great jersey for cooler days. Well fitted, and made from super-comfy, nicely stretchy material, it's also lightweight and wicks well. There are mesh sections under the arms and down the back to promote extra airflow, and the front zip is a good length with a pull that snaps down to hold it from creeping further open. There is a secure zip pocket for valuables and the sunglass wipe is a nice feature. Overall, a top-quality piece of kit.

Janet Coulson



JOYSTICK GRIPS

£21.99

SPECIFICATION Weight: 106g • Diameter: 30mm • Length: 138mm • Contact: hookitproducts.co.uk

These thin, lock-on grips continue Joystick's retro arcade graphic theme from its bar, with a pattern made up of hundreds of little skull and crossbone logos.

They feel nice and grippy to the touch, the rubber compound being satisfyingly tacky. The only trouble is, the narrow diameter means that there's very little rubber between your hand and the grip's rigid inner-sleeve, making them feel quite harsh.

Ben Smith



JOYSTICK ANALOG CARBON BAR

£129.99

SPECIFICATION Width: 800mm • Clamp: 31.8, 35mm • Backsweep: 9° • Upsweep 6° • Rise: 20mm • Weight: 233g • Contact: hookitproducts.co.uk

At a full 800mm width, the Analog carbon bar ticks all the right boxes for a modern enduro-ready handlebar. The one here is the 31.8mm clamp version, which features 20mm rise, 9° backsweep and 6° upsweep. A burlier 35mm version is also available, but it gets an extra 10mm rise.

Funky arcade game-style skull and crossbones logos adorn the bar with a big one in the middle helping centre the bar in the stem. A grippy finish around the centre bulge helps reduce slippage, and cut marks allow you to chop the bar down if 800mm is too much for you.

When hitting corners and berms hard, the bar strikes a good balance between stiffness and resilience. Cranking out of the saddle it felt good and solid but never harsh, the small degree of built-in flex taking the sting out of the trail.

It's up there with the RaceFace SixC and the Easton Havoc on price and width and has similar geometry, so is it a worthy competitor? With the cool graphics and subtle matt carbon finish it looks the part, and with the blend of stiffness and comfort it certainly acts it too.

Ben Smith



JOYSTICK BUILDER STEM

£79.99

SPECIFICATION: Weight 135g (35mm) • Lengths: 35, 50, 65mm • Rise: 0° • Contact: hookitproducts.co.uk

This neat stem is fully CNC-machined out of Joystick's own blend of aluminium, dubbed 8-Bit. Available in either 35, 50 or 65mm lengths, and weighing in at 135g for the 35mm example tested here, it's claimed to be light enough for XC but strong enough for enduro.

Much of this strength comes from the innovative carbon bar-friendly Controlled Clamping System. Two bolts clamp down directly onto the top of the stem — effectively a top-lock design — with the other bolts torquing up at the bottom. This wraps the clamp around almost the entire bar, reducing the number of stress points. Chamfered edges add to the feeling of quality and reduce the chances of scratching the bar during installation.

The stubby 35mm length felt pretty stiff on the bike, there was a reassuring feeling of solidity even when coupled with the 800mm wide bar. At £80 it's a premium price, but the build quality and performance more than justify it.

Ben Smith



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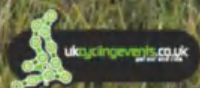
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FABRIC LINE SADDLE

£39.99

SPECIFICATION Weight: 240g • Rails: Hollow cro-mo • Base colour: black, blue, green, red, white • Contact: fabric.cc

When Fabric's new Line arrived, my first thoughts were: it doesn't resemble an S&M device quite as much as the Essax Shark, with its distinctive bum-crack-burrowing fin, but it still looks pretty uncomfortable nonetheless. Happily, it belied my expectations — the thin padding, slim shape and cut-away design has proved fairly comfortable.

It's built on a nylon base that flexes at the nose and wings. Cro-mo rails anchor it to your bike, and for £15 extra you can get titanium rails that save a few grams in weight. The padding is minimal and firm, with a big central relief channel to take pressure off your pudendal nerve — which can lead to numbness down below. I'm pleased to report none occurred, and that the central channel also allows the saddle to flex — it's this movement, rather than the foam itself, that provides most of the comfort. The shape is great too, identical to the brilliant Fabric Scoop, with no sharp edges to snag your shorts.

While good value, light and comfy, I still prefer the Fabric Scoop, simply because it prioritises comfort over reducing weight.

Jamie Darlow



VITTORIA BARZO AND PEYOTE TYRES

£35.99 & £31.99

SPECIFICATION Weight 660g and 640g • Sizes: 29x2.25in and 29x2.1in • TNT casing • Contact: chickencycles.co.uk

Designed as a pair, these new tyres from Italian rubber aficionados Vittoria match up nicely for fast summer trail use and a bit of XC race action too. The larger Barzo tyre, with its slightly more aggressive tread pattern, is designed for the front, with the slimmer and lighter Peyote adding a bit of speed to the back wheel. Vittoria's TNT casing means that these tyres are tubeless ready.

Fitting onto a pair of Roval Traverse 29er wheels with 24mm rims proved hard work. Tyre levers were required to mount even the first bead! Inflation was less of a pain, though, and while we had to remove the valve core for the Barzo, it only required a regular track pump to seat them tubeless.

On the bike, it soon became clear these tyres are happier in the dry. Vittoria reckons the Barzo will

handle some mud, but Italian mud must differ from UK mud, as it never felt at home in the slime. On hard-packed trails it was a quick combo, although neither tyre seemed to roll as well as the Schwalbe Thunder Burt that I'd been running previously. They didn't grip that well when cornering and I struggled to find confidence, often running wide.

The Barzo and Peyote are good, then, rather than great. They certainly won't win any awards for out-and-out grip, but they shouldn't give you any nasty surprises either, at least on dry trails. The carcass is tough for a light tyre and it's nice to see they're relatively affordable too. If you want some good value tyres for tamer XC duties give them a go, but for more aggressive riding, they're lacking in bite.

Al Vines



HOPE R2i LED

£185

SPECIFICATION Weight: 244g (without mount) • Lumens: High 1,046, Medium 680, Low 391 • Run Time: 2-30hrs • Contact: hope-tech.com

Hope has made an alternative to its popular R2 light in the new R2i, ditching the cables and integrating the battery and lamp into one sleek, machined body. The idea is to appeal to riders who like their bikes and bars clutter-free, or don't have space on their frames to mount a battery.

The unit is robust and fits very securely onto its excellent bayonet-style metal bar clamp. There's a good helmet mount too, but the unit weighs 244g, which is far too heavy to go unnoticed on your head.

There are two different power modes to choose from — Race and Trail — and each mode has three power level options. Race mode toggles between the highest setting and two useful lower settings. Trail mode proved less valuable, with a flash setting and two low-power options. The R2i is not programmable either, meaning you can't select just the highest and lowest settings, for example, and it doesn't switch on in the highest power output either.

There's also a five-LED display on top to show how much power is left, but it's not very accurate — when three of the five lights are illuminated there could be anything from 25-50 per cent juice left.

The battery will run for two hours on full power, which is plenty long enough, before switching to energy reserve mode, where it'll run for another 30-minutes, before finally dropping into power saver mode on



a very low beam. Our R2i unit developed a fault after two months, and could only be used in power saver mode: Hope says this is the first time they've heard of it happening, and the replacement worked perfectly.

Pumping out a powerful, white light for its compact size, the R2i delivers very good definition. There's a focused beam firing down the trail that is amongst the best I've tried, and were it not for the weight it would make a great helmet light. Which means the R2i is best used as a bar-mounted light... only the beam doesn't have a good enough spread, with insufficient pooling around the front wheel for. Stick with the original R2, with its separate battery, and run it on your helmet.

Jamie Darlow



MADISON ISOLER MERINO WOMEN'S ZIP-NECK BASE LAYER

£49.99

SPECIFICATION Colours: black or blue • Merino wool • Sizes: 8-16 • Contact: madison.co.uk

My preferred riding gear on cooler days is a short or long-sleeve jersey with a long-sleeve base layer underneath. This combines freedom of movement with warmth and breathability.

Getting the right base layer is important for fit, comfort and wicking qualities. Madison's Isoler base layer is made from merino wool, with its renowned breathability, wicking and odour-resistant qualities. The cut is tailored, meaning it doesn't wrinkle or scrunch up under an outer layer, while the stretchy quality of the material allows comfortable, unrestricted movement. It gets flat-lock stitching, and a flap covering the top of the zip to prevent chafing under your chin, while the zip itself is a good length for ventilation. Note that the sizing comes up small, so if you can't try one on before you buy, you may want to order a size up.

Janet Coulson



NUKEPROOF CRITICAL ENDURO KNEE SLEEVE

£40

SPECIFICATION Weight: 272g • Sizes: S, M, L, XL • Contact: hotlines-uk.com

Let's be clear, Nukeproof's Critical Enduro Knee Sleeve is a lightweight, breathable knee-pad for XC/Enduro riding. It's not designed for full-on downhill. Rather than a hard plastic cap, the Enduro Knee Sleeve uses foam, which will stop gravel rash and deal with lighter impacts but nothing more.

It could be the very lack of a hard cap is exactly why it's so comfortable. There's a slight articulation, to improve the fit, but there are no hard edges inside, annoying creases on the back or Velcro straps to chafe or flap. Even the silicone strips that hold the pad in place are subtle and understated.

A Kevlar outer protects against scuffs, and the pad is lined with a moisture-wicking towel fabric with rear mesh panels for ventilation. The thick material can get a little warm if you're pedalling hard, but I didn't mind it as it provided additional insulation on chilly

early morning rides.

If you just want a bit of abrasion resistance and scuff protection, without the bulk, the Enduro Knee Sleeve is spot on — light, comfy and amazing value.

Paul Burwell



SUGOI SG 14 RSX SUSPEN SHORT

£119.99

SPECIFICATION Colour: black • Sizes: S, M, L, XL • Contact: sugoi.com

If you think the BOA closure system is flash for a pair of shoes, how about a pair of shorts with it fitted? These lightweight shorts from Sugoi use the constricting cable, and although it's arguably tech overkill, it's actually a simple and accurate way to adjust the waistband in small increments.

The baggy short itself is attractive, in stealthy plain black with small, high-vis logos. With reinforced mesh panels at the front and back, they're also lightweight and cool. They have a double-popper front fastener, zip fly and secure rear pocket, large enough to carry some loose change.

Included with the short is a padded liner, featuring a mesh bib, fly opening and a complex chamois, designed to optimise airflow. And it works well. However, the thigh area can feel a bit stiff and clingy, especially around the leg grippers, making it a little uncomfortable on a long hot day. A quality baggy short, if a little pricey.

Matt Levett



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DAVE ARTHUR

Position Writer/tester
Mostly rides FoD/Wales
Height 5ft 11in
Weight 66kg

THE BIKE

- 27.5 Plus version of the venerable Stumpy
- 135mm travel FSR rear suspension and 150mm fork
- 3.0in tyres and Boost dropouts front and rear
- SRAM GX 1x11 gears paired with Shimano brakes
- Spec includes 60mm stem, 750mm bar and a dropper post

If you're a 14-year-old reading this, you're probably thinking, "wow that bike looks cool!" If however, you're a bit older with a decade of mountain biking in your legs, you could be thinking, "what the hell is that?!" Well, it's the new Specialized Stumpjumper FSR Comp 6Fattie with 3.0in tyres, and apparently it's the next big thing in mountain biking. Yup, that's right, it's a 27.5 Plus bike.

The Comp 6Fattie is the cheapest bike in a range of four models for 2016 — which shows Specialized's commitment to the new tyre/wheel size. It rolls on 27.5in rims that are shod with 3.0in wide tyres to create a bike that... doesn't look as crazy as you might imagine when you get up close and personal. Which is exactly what I intend to do over the next six months.

With the cool orange paint job and minimal decals the 6Fattie sure makes a good first impression. It's a great looking bike, and as smartly packaged as any modern Spesh full-susser. Its aluminium frame has the familiar FSR rear suspension delivering 135mm travel, and to provide all the necessary stiffness and clearance at the back for the massive tyre it's got

Boost 148x12mm dropouts. At the opposite end of the bike, the Fox 34 fork is similarly boosted, with a 110x15mm axle — that's 10mm wider than the standard 15mm quick-release.

Yes, £2,500 is a lot of cash for a bike, given what's currently available from the direct sales brands, but the spec on the 6Fattie certainly isn't lacking. You get a no-nonsense finishing kit that includes SRAM GX gears with a small 28t chainring for grinding up even the steepest gradients. Other highlights include Shimano Deore brakes and the new 125mm Command Post IRcc dropper post. With its 10 micro-adjust positions, this is a big improvement over the old three-setting post.

The big talking point, however, is the 3.0in Purgatory Control front tyre and Ground Control rear tyre. Unlike other Plus bikes, Specialized has stuck with its relatively narrow 29mm Roval Traverse aluminium rims, which are exactly the same as you'll find on the standard 27.5in Stumpy. Interestingly, the outside diameter of the 3.0in tyres is about the same as a

6Fattie: Spesh's term for 650b Plus

WHY IT'S HERE
To see how Plus size tyres handle a typical British winter

29x2.2in setup — so slightly taller than Plus bikes using the more common 2.8in tyres. Why so wide then? According to Specialized, the fat 3.0in tyres provide "levels of traction, control, and flotation that will shake your idea of trail riding to the core". I can't wait to find out if this bike really lives up to those heady claims. I've got six months with it and all winter to see how it handles mud. And coming from the Giant Trance and GT Sensor, I've got some good benchmark 27.5in trail bikes to compare the 6Fattie to.

SRAM's latest drivetrain, GX brings high-spec 1x11 to a lower price point



Big and wide up front, the Boost 110 hub will keep things stiff



SPECIFICATION

Frame M5 Alloy, Boost 148, 135mm travel

Shock Fox Float Performance DPS w/ Autosag

Fork Fox 34 Plus Performance, 150mm travel

Wheels Roval Traverse alloy, Specialized 6Fattie Purgatory/ Ground Control 27.5x3in tyres

Drivetrain SRAM GX-1000 28T, SRAM GX shifters and mech

Brakes: Shimano Deore, 180mm

Components: Specialized Command Post IRcc, BG Henge saddle, XC 60mm stem, 750mm alloy bar

Sizes: S, M, L, XL

Weight: 14.1kg (31.1lb)

Contact: specialized.com

GEOMETRY

Size tested L

Head angle 66.9°

Seat angle 68.4°

BB height 328mm

Chainstay 437mm

Front centre 749mm

Wheelbase 1,186mm

Down tube 723mm

Top tube 616mm

Reach: 431mm

IN THE SHED



Commençal Meta HT AM Race 650B £1,144.51



KTM Macina Lycan 27.5 X111 CX5+ £3,749.99



Specialized Stumpjumper FSR Comp 6Fattie £2,500



Transition TransAm 29 £1,899



Trek Remedy 9 29 £3,500



Vitus Escarpe VRX £1,999.99



Blurring the lines between wheel sizes, will 27.5 Plus erase the 29er?



JASON'S KTM MACINA LYCAN 27.5 X1 11 CX5+

£3,749.99 / 27.5in / shop.flidistribution.co.uk



THE RIDER

JASON HARDY
Position Picture editor
Mostly rides Surrey Hills
Height 6ft 2in
Weight 101kg

THE BIKE

- 27.5in e-bike designed specifically for trail riding
- New 250w Bosch CX system offers power assist
- Fox rear shock delivers 125mm travel
- Weighs 20.8kg (45.9lb)

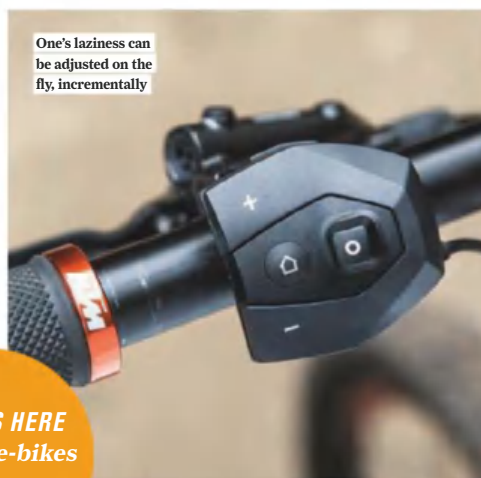
MONTH 2: J-Wagon has mixed feelings about his somewhat premature step into the world of electrically-assisted mobility

Oh man, what a crazy bike this KTM Lycan is. How many short-travel, near-50lb bikes can you think of that would have you grinning from ear to ear within the first few pedal strokes? It's such a conundrum.

The bike comes alive beneath you. The first turn of the pedals sparks it to life, then the electric assist kicks in and you're off, the high-pitched whine of the motor invariably accompanied by an equally high-pitched giggle from the rider. It's not a motor with a throttle, though, so it makes you pedal faster and faster to continue to reap the benefit of the assistance. And before you know it, you're at the top of that not inconsiderable incline with barely a bead of perspiration on your brow. Crazy.

However, once over the initial shock (if you'll pardon the pun) of having an electric motor, my early impressions of the Lycan are mixed. The Nyon screen seems to have a mind of its own, the skinny Schwalbe Rocket Ron tyres are sketchy as hell in the current cool, damp conditions, and the bar and stem combo are about as stiff as an over-ripe banana. And when I accidentally switched the power off, the Lycan's spell was broken, transforming it from a dazzling carriage to an overweight pumpkin.

A few nervous prods of the bar-mounted control pod and the power was mercifully back on, and so too was my grin. It rammed home the point, though, that I really don't want to be caught out on the trail with a flat battery any further than 200m from the car park.



One's laziness can be adjusted on the fly, incrementally

WHY IT'S HERE
To see if e-bikes really are cheating

In fact, the thought of pedalling its colossal mass any distance without the push of the motor brings me out in a cold sweat.

Still, I'm excited to be riding the KTM, and my first couple of outings raised a whole host of questions. How much would I value the addictive power over the ride quality and handling? Would I be able to return to a 'normal' bike after this one? And the most pressing question of all: are e-bikes just cheating? Hopefully I'll be able to answer these questions, and countless others, over the next six months.

SPECIFICATION

Frame Hydroformed aluminium, 125mm travel
Shock Fox Performance Series Float CTD BV
Fork Fox 34 Float, 130mm travel
Wheels DT Swiss 350 hubs, DT Swiss M422 rims, Schwalbe Rocket Ron 27.5x2.25in tyres
Drivetrain Bosch CX Pedelecsystem 250 watt electric motor, 36v 500Wh lithium-ion battery. KTM Team Delta ISIS cranks, SRAM X1 mech and shifter
Brakes Shimano Deore XT, 180mm
Components Bosch Nyon LCD Center Display, Selle Italia SL saddle, KTM Team bar, stem, grips and seatpost
Sizes 15, 17, 19, 21in
Weight 20.8kg (45.9lb)

GEOMETRY

Size tested 19in
Head angle 69.7°
Seat angle 72.8°
BB height 340mm
Chainstay 475mm
Front centre 680mm
Wheelbase 1,155mm
Down tube 670mm
Top tube 585mm
Reach 426mm

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THE RIDER

JAMES SMURTHWAITE

Position Junior writer

Mostly rides

Surrey Hills

Height 5ft 11in

Weight 70kg

THE BIKE

- 650b trail bike with slack geometry
- Asymmetric travel: 150mm front, 135mm rear
- Cutting-edge 1x11 SRAM drivetrain
- Short stem and RockShox Reverb Stealth dropper post

MONTH 5: James takes a suspension set-up master class and passes... just

Following a Muldoon Set-Up Masterclass®, the concerns I expressed about the climbing performance of the Vitus have dwindled. We only moved the saddle forward about 10 millimetres but I now feel more upright and forward on the bike when seated. The front wheel now stays grounded and I feel like the power is being transmitted more directly from my legs to the cranks — a big improvement.

Muldoon also felt I was running my suspension too soft, so I now have my fork at 90psi and my shock at 180psi. The difference comes mainly in the corners where I can keep my weight a lot more centred on the bike. I no longer exit a berm hanging off the back and feeling like I have to clamber back on to set up for the next turn.

My hands definitely take more of a pounding with the firmer set-up, but I think that's got more to do with the action of the Marzocchi 350 CR than the changes we made to pressures. We're well past the bedding-in period and the 150mm fork has developed some stiction. I'm not sure whether this comes from the seals or fork internals, so some more digging is required, but it's very noticeable when compared to a Pike. The fork also doesn't come with an O-ring on the upper tubes, making proper set-up quite difficult. I will be using a cable-tie in future to make sure I get it dialled, but for now I just have to suck up the harshness.

WHY IT'S HERE
Bespoke dual
susser from
CRC's own
brand



JIM'S TRANSITION TRANSAM 29

£1,899 / 29in / windwave.co.uk

MONTH 10: New wheels have the TransAM cornering on rails



THE RIDER

JIM CLARKSON

Position Graphic designer

Mostly rides

Sussex trails

Height 5ft 10in

Weight 76kg

THE BIKE

- 29er 'all-mountain' hardtail
- Durable steel frame with adjustable chainstay length
- RockShox Pike fork with 120mm travel
- Available as a frame-only for £499

WHY IT'S HERE
A reliably tough
hardtail for
all-day riding

Last month I talked about knocking some weight off the TransAm. Well the best place to start is always the wheels and this is even more important on a 29er. So even though it's not really in the spirit of long-term testing, I've ditched the stock wheels and fitted some Hope Hoops to the TransAM. This has resulted in slightly less effort when getting up to speed, but the biggest improvement is in how much easier it is to initiate a turn, or swap from one linked corner to another. Basically the bike feels nipper and more engaging and it's easy to see why lightweight wheels are so popular with 29er riders.

While I've been busy bumping the price of the TransAM up by adding fancy wheels, Transition is moving in the opposite direction and has actually dropped the price to £1,400. Unfortunately, the level of specification has also taken

a hit — the RockShox Pike fork replaced by a Suntour Aion RC. On the plus side, you now get Maxxis Minion tyres and the top-quality frame remains unchanged.

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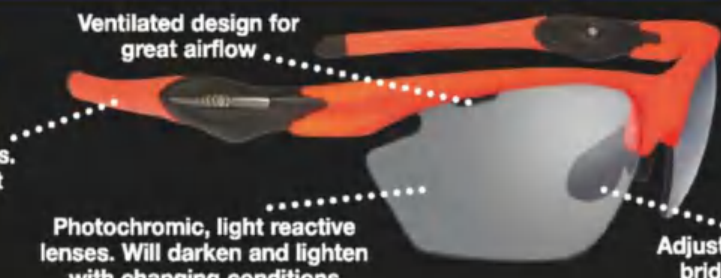
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JAMIE'S TREK REMEDY 9 29

£3,500 / 29in / trekbikes.com



THE RIDER

JAMIE DARLOW
Position Buzz editor
Mostly rides
Surrey Hills
Height 6ft 1in
Weight 75kg

THE BIKE

- 29er trail bike with 140mm travel and enduro-bike stiffness
- Newfangled RE:aktiv damper from Fox and Penske Racing
- Mino link adjustable geometry to fettle head angle and BB height
- Internal cabling, 1x11 drivetrain, Reverb Stealth dropper post

MONTH 9: JD's pimped his ride — just in time for his Yankee big-wheeler to be discontinued...

Those cars you see, usually in town centres or supermarket car parks, so low they grind their way over speed bumps, with thunderous exhausts, tinted glass to turn day into night, and Alpine stickers in the windows... I've always hated those cars. Not rationally, of course, more because I didn't understand them — why take a perfectly good car and make it, frankly, weird? I get it now, though, because I've created the mountain bike equivalent of the modified car and, crucially, made it work better.

The original-spec Remedy arrived with **mbr** in May, the first bike Trek had produced in conjunction with Penske Racing in the USA, a tie-up that promised supple suspension with loads of support. When the bike arrived, the suspension performance was nothing short of amazing, plush and active on rough stuff and matched to one of the best forks on the market, the RockShox Pike. I was singing its praises after the first ride, but with a nagging doubt at the back of my mind about whether the bike could be even better — lower

WHY IT'S HERE
To see if Trek, Fox and Penske have made the ultimate suspension

and slacker.

I listened to that voice in my head, and set about modifying the Remedy's geometry: the BB dropped 10mm when I fitted offset shock mounting hardware, and the head angle slackened out two degrees with offset headset cups, while a couple of volume-reducer tokens went into the fork to make it more progressive and hold my weight up better when the bike is pointed downwards.

And now, at long last, I believe I've got the best Remedy in the UK — Tracy Moseley's EWS bike notwithstanding. It's now low... I mean, Stumpjumper-low, with a 338mm bottom bracket height. It's really long too, more stretched-out than pretty much any other 140 trail bike on the market, with a really slack head angle to boot. The upshot is, it feels remarkable on descents; super stable and planted without a trace of the nervousness I first detected 10 months ago on steep stuff. This is how the Remedy should be, so it's a massive blow that Trek has decided to can the 29er version in the UK for 2016.

SPECIFICATION

Frame Alpha Platinum Aluminium, 140mm travel
Shock Fox Performance Series Float, DRCV, RE:aktiv, CTD
Fork RockShox Pike RC, Solo Air, 140mm travel
Wheels SRAM Roam 30 tubeless, Bontrager XR4 Expert/XR3 29x2.3in tyres
Drivetrain SRAM X1
Brakes Shimano XT
Components Bontrager saddle, bar, stem and grips, RockShox Reverb Stealth seatpost,
Sizes 15.5, 17.5, 19, 21, 23in
Weight 13.74kg (30.3lb)

GEOMETRY

(LOW SETTING)
Size tested 21in
Head angle 67.4°
Seat angle 68.7°
BB height 348mm
Chainstay 449mm
Front centre 750mm
Wheelbase 1,199mm
Down tube 712mm
Top tube 618mm
Reach 451mm

BICYCLE TOOLS

Patent YC-396

NEW YC-515

NEW YC-3078B

NEW Patent YC-1568

NEW YC-TPH8-T25

NEW YC-799AB

NEW Patent YC-725

NEW Patent YC-109A

YC-748

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£1,144.51 / 27.5in / commencal-store.co.uk

THE RIDER

ROO FOWLER

Position Photographer
Mostly rides Surrey Hills
Height 6ft 4in
Weight 87kg

THE BIKE

- 650b enduro hardtail that's actually available in XL!
- Slack 65.3° head angle with 150mm RockShox Revelation fork
- Great spec for the money
- Order online and have it shipped to your door

MONTH 9: Has Commencal created the ultimate hardtail? Nine months' gestation and Roo reveals all

What attracted you to the Meta HT AM Race 650b?

The Meta had promising vital stats and a very attractive price when bought directly from the Commencal Store.

Did you change anything straightaway?

I was determined to keep the bike in standard trim for as long as possible, to really test out the original spec, so there were no immediate changes. But over the course of the test I relented and changed the Formula brakes (too inconsistent), the tyres (too skinny), and the stem and handlebar (too long and too narrow). All of which helped transform the Commencal from a good hardtail into a great one.

Was the bike easy to set up?

With a hardtail, it's more critical to get the fork set up correctly than on a full-suss bike. Thankfully, I got on really

well with the RockShox Revelation and after a bit of tweaking with air pressure it proved set and forget. The 2.25in Maxxis Ardent tyre on the rear was a bit narrow and I found it difficult to strike a balance between grip, bump absorption and pinch-puncture resistance.

How did it ride?

Being perfectly honest, I didn't enjoy my first rides on the Meta HT. I could tell there was a good bike lurking under the neon yellow paint, but I was struggling to find it. In the end it took three key changes to release that untapped potential. First was to swap the Formula CR3 brakes, as I couldn't get used to the binary action and regularly found myself accidentally braking when simply covering the levers. Stability is paramount on a hardtail and the second change was to fit a wider bar and shorter stem to improve



Ardents: good all-rounders but too skinny for comfort

control. The final change was where the rubber meets the road. Again the stock Maxxis Ardent tyres weren't bad, but fitting beefier tyres improved control and comfort.

Even with the changes it wasn't all rosy. From the very first ride I felt that the rear end of the bike was a bit too harsh, and even with the bigger tyres that sensation remained. Don't get me wrong, the sizing and geometry of the frame are right up there, I just feel it needs a bit of comfort engineered into the stays.

WHY IT'S HERE
 Killer price, killer attitude and the sizing goes up to XL



Putting the pedal to the Meta: Roo rails the Surrey Hills



HIGHS

- The RockShox Revelation fork — it felt stiff enough and performed flawlessly throughout the test.
- Swapping to some Michelin Wild Rock'R 2 tyres, when the bike then came alive.
- Some of the last, late summer rides on the Meta HT after the three key spec changes were implemented — I felt every bit as confident hitting the same stuff I'd been riding on my full-suspension trail bike.



LOWS

- The first few rides when the Formula brakes started rubbing on the discs and eventually dragged me and the bike to a halt.
- Any misjudged landings where you feel the lack of compliance in the rear end. In fact, spot a rock on the landing of a jump and you'd better have an inner tube in your pack.
- Getting used to a 100mm dropper after being spoiled by a 150mm.

Did anything break or wear out?

From the off, the Formula brakes proved troublesome. Even when first assembling the bike I couldn't stop the rear brake from rubbing. Then on the first ride, both brakes started rubbing to the point they'd lock the wheels even when I was pushing the bike. Once serviced by UK distributor Silverfish the Formula CR3s worked far better but even the lightest touch would lock the wheels.

If you could change one thing about your longtermer what would it be?

That's easy! The Formula brakes would come straight off. However, if you like snappy brakes, some medium compound 2.4in tyres with beefy sidewalls would make the biggest difference.

Would you buy this bike?

No... I'd buy the 2016 model instead. Yes the price has crept up to £1,400 but it now comes with a RockShox Pike fork, 1X drivetrain and SRAM DB5 brakes.



SPECIFICATION

Frame 6061 triple-butted alloy
Fork RockShox Revelation RL Solo Air, 150mm travel
Wheels Sealed bearing hubs, double wall 28mm rims, Maxxis Ardent 2.4/2.25in tyres
Drivetrain Alpha 24/38 chainset, SRAM X9 r-mech, X5 f-mech, X7 2x10 shifters
Brakes Formula CR3, 180mm
Components Alpha 750mm bar, 60mm stem, KS eTen 100mm dropper, Meta AM saddle
Sizes S, M, L, XL
Weight 12.84kg (28.3lb)

GEOMETRY

Size tested XL
Head angle 65.3°
Seat angle 72.7°
BB height 309mm
Chainstay 426mm
Front centre 752mm
Wheelbase 1,178mm
Down tube 715mm
Top tube 635mm
Reach 447mm

Winter tyres

With the right winter rubber, you can find grip while all around you slip. We test a dozen mud tyres

Words: Mick Kirkman Photos: Mick Kirkman, Roo Fowler

Every winter, rather than slip and slide defensively through the gloop and muck, it pays real dividends to fit specific mud tyres. They bring extra grip and promote greater confidence at every turn, allowing you to keep attacking the trails.

Pick a versatile mud tyre and you'll only need to swap tyres once this winter. With half an hour in the workshop, you can enhance your riding until the clocks go forward again next spring.

Well-spaced, spiky blocks are the signature tread pattern of winter-friendly tyres, but the height and aggression of these knobs, and the weight and width of the tyre casing, are further factors that directly affect drag, overall bulk and a product's optimal terrain and purpose. Even with mud tyres you can have too much of a good thing, which is why you need to balance wet weather grip with acceptable rolling resistance.

With a massive 12 sets of tyres tested here, including some brand new models, this test covers every angle. We've got rubber targeted at taming the steepest, most treacherous, downhill trails, right through to those more suited to general wet weather riding on firmer surfaces. In short, whether you're a mile-munching race whippet or a bona fide DH shredder, we've got the optimal tyre for you.

USED AND ABUSED

How we test

Reviewing 12 pairs of winter tyres requires some serious ride time. Local conditions remained dry for the bulk of early autumn, but, after the bizarre situation of *wanting* it to rain, the weather turned and stacks of slime and mud reared its head for a final frenzy of back-to-back testing.

After riding the tyres in as many locations as possible — with the help of a crew of local rippers — a steep, technical hand-cut downhill track with treacherous steepes and a rocky chute served as a final challenge for the more spiky, slow-rolling tyres. Back-to-back runs quickly confirmed which tyres felt the safest and most confidence-inspiring in the worst of conditions.

Know your winter tyre

WEIGHT

Mud tyres need significantly more support to keep big tread blocks stable, which adds weight. More fabric and rubber in the construction of grippier, wider tyres also adds weight, but bigger air volumes offer more comfort and isolation from the ground — especially useful on hardtails to smooth out the rougher ride. Overall rotating weight becomes very noticeable when big tyres pick up clag, and therefore muddy tyres can make it hard to change direction at speed — although that isn't always a bad thing in extreme conditions!

RUBBER COMPOUND

Durometer is the quoted measure for rubber hardness, with higher numbers signifying a firmer compound, i.e. 60a is harder than 50a. This durometer measurement is only a guideline, as proprietary compounds and blends can also make huge differences to grip, rebound damping and rolling speed. In this respect, rubber is something of a 'dark art', with certain tyres often surprising on specific terrain and surfaces.

TREAD

More open tread patterns should hold onto less gloop and clear more readily once up to speed, but the downside is greater rolling resistance. Mud tyres get pronounced shoulder blocks for better cornering hold and off-camber bite. Rubber formulas and special coatings on the outer casing surface (beneath the blocks) are also designed to shed sticky mud more quickly.

CASING

It's harder to stick to precise lines to protect sidewalls from abrasions and sharp edges in slippery winter conditions. Therefore it's worth thinking about running a heavier casing with better protection and durability — the caveat being that riding in the winter is slow-going, and a heavier carcass can decrease acceleration and rolling speed further.



AIR PRESSURE

Different tyres require different pressures and, generally, the thicker the casing the lower the air pressure you can get away with. Year-round, aim for the minimum air pressure that keeps the tyre casing from twisting too much under hard cornering forces and still prevents rim strikes under impacts. If you often run with more than 30psi, try reducing pressure and experimenting with softer tyres in winter.

WIDTH

Thinner tyres carve through deep, thick mud more effectively, but be realistic as to how much of your ride time is spent in proper gloop, as wider tyres are generally better everywhere else. A good compromise is a wider 'grip' tyre up front and a thinner 'drive' tyre out back, but beware that super-fat front rubber can 'float' a little in serious mud rather than 'cutting' in.



CONTINENTAL DER BARON PROJEKT

£59.99

SPECIFICATION Weight: 990g • Size tested: 27.5x2.4in
• Contact: conti-tyres.co.uk

Handmade in Germany, the Baron uses a sophisticated multi-layered construction and unique rubber blend.

Using smaller ramped and siped (grooved) blocks, it's slightly wider, with a near continuous row of edge knobs, than the older Baron we rated highly in the wet. This tread tweak is designed to improve dry-weather performance and grip levels, especially braking control.

Conti's Black Chili rubber formula has a well-earned reputation for durability and, after several long rides, the Barons still look like new — which helps justify the £60 price. The reinforced Apex sidewall is designed to resist cuts and rips and should also enhance tyre life.

Rolling resistance feels marginally higher than a 3C High Roller II, but mud clearance, braking traction and confidence in wetter conditions is slightly improved — only in the deepest mud does it falter. Even if the tyre isn't quite as supple as some here, the tread blocks are well damped when hitting rocks or pounding down hard-pack trails.

One issue unique to Der Baron was repeated deflations over time when set up tubeless. This was especially frustrating, since we'd happily run the Baron all year round in the majority of natural UK conditions, if we could keep the air in it.



HUTCHINSON DZO ENDURO

£49

SPECIFICATION Weight: 1,115g • Size tested: 27.5x2.25in
• Contact: spitfire-distribution.co.uk

The DZO Enduro is yet another Hutchinson tyre with a great casing. The French brand seems to have a knack for manufacturing supple, comfortable mountain bike tyres and the DZO irons out the creases on the roughest terrain even though it has a reasonably modest air volume.

The rubber compound — a mix of 50a in the centre and super-soft, sticky 40a shoulder blocks — helps with damping control. Sporting sturdy tread blocks sculpted into a fiercely aggressive fanged pattern, the tyre mirrors the contours of the ground very well as you ride. Rolling resistance isn't that bad either, considering the aggression of the spikes jutting out of the dual-ply casing, but these puppies are never going to set mellow singletrack on fire. Lugging such heavy tyres around, on less dangerous terrain, will be overkill for most riders. On the plus side, Hutchinson's heavy-duty construction can take a beating and has excellent wear life if you're looking for a wet-weather gravity tyre.

In a direct comparison with the other more aggressive tyres here, the DZOs bite fiercely but don't quite offer the same sensation that you can take liberties when leant over hard whatever the conditions underneath the wheels. However, as a solid, long lasting, pure mud downhill tyre, the DZO is a good choice.



HUTCHINSON TORO ENDURO

£49

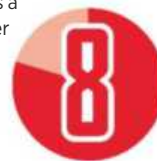
SPECIFICATION Weight: 1,020g • Size tested: 27.5x2.25in • Contact: spitfire-distribution.co.uk

Hutchinson's Toro enduro tyre is available in two widths, with the narrower 2.25in version saving just over 100g of weight. Last year we tested the huge 2.35in and loved the flat-topped profile, the comfort of its massive air volume and the outstanding grip and all-round security, but it really required mountainous terrain to justify the thick casing and extra bulk.

The 2.25in version, here, shares the same supple, ground hugging carcass (a Hutchinson signature), but the centre knobs are straighter and lower profile, so designed to be faster rolling. The tyre compound is a mixture of 50a rubber in the lower central tread zone and sticky edge blocks for more cornering bite and to prevent any sudden pinging off roots or edges. The narrower model rolls significantly faster than its draggy big brother, but still shares the same trait of predictability over wet roots or rocks.

Suction-pad-like blocks sit closer together, so collect sticky mud a little more easily, but this tight spacing means we've yet to rip a Toro casing, making this a great option if you want a long-lasting, reliable tyre that straddles the ground between XC and pure DH.

A wider front and narrower rear Toro combo affords excellent all-round grip, but the Toro really excels as a rear tyre in the narrower size, especially since there are lighter and faster-rolling front tyres available with equivalent grip levels.



MAXXIS BEAVER EXO

£37.99

SPECIFICATION Weight: 785g • Size tested: 27.5x2.0in
• Contact: extrauk.co.uk

Rather than being purely an out-and-out mud plugger, we've always found the Maxxis Beaver a better all-round trail tyre. The dual-compound construction sees a softer layer applied over a firmer base, making the Beaver pretty fast rolling for a wet-weather tyre, yet it still excels in damp and slippery conditions. The rubber compound and tread is surefooted on roots, rocks and wet trail-centre kitty litter, and the widely spaced small blocks are great at continually clearing out cack — they even double up as great loam scrapers in the drier months. Another Beaver highlight is its tenacious climbing traction — its ability to winch up slippery banks is every bit as impressive as its namesake's.

The Beaver is strictly an XC option in terms of toughness. Even with Maxxis' special EXO protection, to help prevent cuts and tears to the casing — very useful if wet conditions send wheels offline into sharper edges or rocks — it's still relatively lightweight and fragile. In fact we punctured the thin casing in testing, and if you pump it up hard to compensate, the small volume is just harsh on the bumps.

We've tried the slightly beefier 2.25in version, which is way more comfortable, but seems to lack some of the bite of the narrower model through deep slop. If Maxxis made a taller tyre with a slightly thicker casing, the Beaver would be close to perfect.



MAXXIS SHORTY

£54.99

SPECIFICATION Weight: 830g • Size tested: 27.5x2.3in
• Contact: extrauk.co.uk

Last winter the Maxxis Shorty was the new kid on the block, and after a full year of extended testing, we've now used it in more scenarios, including dry loam and blown out rocks and dust. The design is essentially a cut-down mud spike, but it's proven way more versatile than a pure mud specialist and will happily double up as a dry weather tyre.

Maxxis' superb 3C rubber formula is a big factor in the performance — it feels predictable everywhere and lasts reasonably well considering the grip on offer. The spaced-out Shorty knobs are noticeably slow rolling, and a tad lumpy on hard surfaces, but the 830g weight and mid-thickness casing, with EXO protection, add up to just about a perfect blend for most UK winter trail riding.

Very occasionally, when used up front in deep, saturated mud, the Shorty can lose traction suddenly, which means it feels less assured than some of the dedicated mud spikes here, or even the Schwalbe Magic Mary. Another minor issue is that the leading centre block edge is ramped to improve rolling speed, but this reduces dig-in and traction when climbing up sloppy pitches.

These two criticisms are mere quibbles, though. As a tough, versatile, aggressive trail tyre that can handle wet or dry conditions, the Shorty is 99 per cent sorted.



MICHELIN WILD MUD ADVANCED REINFORCED

£56.99

SPECIFICATION Weight: 980g • Size tested: 27.5x2.25in
• Contact: hotlines-uk.com

Using Michelin's super-squishy Magi X grippy rubber mix (that's usually only found on its front-specific tyres), this hefty Wild Mud tyre proved a revelation in the nastiest conditions.

Across disgusting slop, big roots, off-cambers and edges that usually put the fear into you, the deforming tread blocks dampen any unexpected pings or grip outages, making you feel super-safe. The soft rubber formula and multi-layered tread knobs essentially calms down the terrain, and, more than any other tyre here, you can ride with more confidence in the wet.

This ultimate control comes at a price — the trade-off for the leech-like grip is that they're also really slow everywhere. The tyres are even slow going on downhill trails if the gradient is shallow. One way to keep entertained between gnarly segments is to deliberately pick out steep, technical, slippery climbs and enjoy the traction, since riding up tarmac, or fire road, will be a real chore.

Overkill for 90 per cent of UK riding then, but an awesome tool if you want to embarrass your mates on an uplift day in the rain, or ride the gnarliest tracks in your area.



ONZA GREINA

£59.95

SPECIFICATION Weight: 1,070g • Size tested: 27.5x2.4in
• Contact: silverfish.co.uk

Swiss brand Onza has pushed its tough 27.5in mud tyre further into enduro territory from the significantly lighter 26in version we rated a few seasons ago. At over a kilo, the fatter Greina is clearly built to last, with a thicker dual-ply carcass using a coarse construction to resist casing penetration.

The Greina bead snapped on to the rim fiercely, sealed first time and immediately felt solid when slicing through loose clag. Even with aggressively ramped leading tread edges, it bobbles on hard ground and feels quite slow to turn over and maintain speed. This makes sense with the thicker casing, but it does use a firmer 65a durometer centre strip, so we'd expected to roll a bit faster.

Despite these harder blocks on the crown, hold and braking poise on greasy surfaces going straight is very assured. Leant over hard, grip seemed to fade away in a few instances — nothing too bad, but the tyre tends to float, rather than catch an edge. There's also a sense that the offset edge knobs flutter in long, flat, greasy corners or when holding off-camber slopes.

Like its dry-conditions equivalent, the Onza Ibex (which shares a similar rubber compound and casing), the Greina lasts well, and clears superbly, so we can only conclude that it's the tread pattern we're not fully sold on.



SCHWALBE MAGIC MARY

£49.99

SPECIFICATION Weight: 828g • Size tested: 27.5x2.35in
Snakeskin Trailstar • Contact: schwalbe.co.uk

As an intermediate tyre, the Magic Mary's credentials are beyond question — take one look at the start line of a top enduro race and it's easily one of the most popular choices. The ultimate endorsement being that some riders even run Magic Marys with the logos blacked out, despite being sponsored by other brands.

With simple, huge square blocks jutting out at all angles, the tread pattern looks a lot like a classic motocross tyre, and, sure enough, chuck it at some gloop and it'll take everything in its stride — only a pure downhill spike has more bite.

The tread pattern, and sheer size of the tyre (the 2.35 looks more like a 2.5in) inspires aggressive, cocky riding and the Magic's grip levels back up your ambitions in almost all conditions. Thanks to its huge air volume, it's also extremely comfortable.

The Snakeskin casing version is perfect on the front, with less weight to drag around than any other tyre with equivalent grip, but can be a little fragile on the rear if you ride in a rocky area. A tougher, dual-ply, Super Gravity carcass is available, but it is significantly slower rolling.

The bottom line is this German tyre is tough to beat as a year-round front tyre in UK conditions, and is therefore our number one choice for aggressive riding.



SCHWALBE NOBBY NIC II

£49.99

SPECIFICATION Weight: 750g • Size tested: 27.5x2.35in
Snakeskin Trailstar • Contact: schwalbe.co.uk

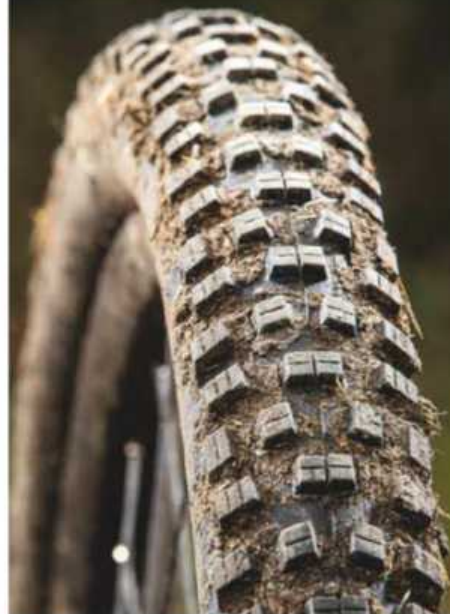
It's no exaggeration to say we didn't like the old Nobby Nic. But the redesigned tread pattern and new casing has completely transformed its performance, and in its softer Trailstar compound, the Nobby Nic II is a jack-of-all-trades.

The offset tread blocks are spread out enough to clear the worst of mud and slime, but sticky clay and rotten vegetation still clog the tread a little more than a dedicated mud tyre. Rolling speed is great for the grip and bite on offer and, once scrubbed-in, the ground-hugging rubber does an excellent job on wet roots and rocks.

The 750g is a good weight for a 27.5in tyre — the casing is medium thickness and strikes a decent compromise between lightweight and durability — the sidewalls also use a Snakeskin liner to defend against rips and cuts.

The Nics were a bit of a struggle to mount tubeless, but once inflated we had zero issues with puncturing the crown of the carcass — the thicker tread blocks protect much better from impacts than other lightweight options such as the Storm Control and Beaver.

The Nic II isn't cheap, but performance-wise it's one of the best all-round XC tyres on the market for the front or the back. It's a great all-seasons trail tyre, but only a fit-and-forget winter tyre if you ride in a really sandy or rocky area.



SPECIALIZED HILLBILLY GRID 2BLISS

£35

SPECIFICATION Weight: 1,050g • Size tested: 29x2.3in
• Contact: specialized.com

The first thing that stands out about the new Hillbilly — for a sticky rubber, dual-ply enduro-ready tyre — is its bargain price. It is essentially a cut-down mud spike, with a hollowed-out, sucker-pad version of the Storm tread. The second thing we noticed is how, as mountain bike tyre technology moves forward, more tyres begin to look like blocky motocross treads. It makes sense; motorbikes have to churn through loose, often-muddy, conditions looking for grip, and you almost feel like you're on a 'crosser bombing around with the Hillbillys on. Sure, at over a kilo, they feel draggy, but the tough, reinforced casing should see you through any scrapes and knocks, and wherever you plant the sharp blocks they just grab and never let go. Even the rolling speed isn't that bad considering the capability and control on offer.

Mud clearing ability is superb, but the Hillbilly is also surefooted and predictable on intermediate surfaces. The highest praise we can give it is how we often forgot this was a test tyre, and just got on with our riding — the Hillbilly simply gets the job done without any issues. As an aggressive tyre that's not too painful to pedal round, the Hillbilly is a fantastic option. And it's even available to fit 29in wheels.



SPECIALIZED STORM CONTROL 2BLISS

£30

SPECIFICATION Weight: 650g • Size tested: 29x2.0in
• Contact: specialized.com

A firm favourite here at **mb**r, the tubeless-ready Storm Control is studded with small blocks, and designed for mud, but versatile enough for most trail riding. The spread-out knobs have excellent mud-clearing ability, good bite in gloop and softer dirt, and yet manage to remain efficient at devouring the miles.

Key to the Storm's versatility is its low weight, which means it's never a chore to accelerate, combined with sure-footedness, that stems from a tread pattern and rubber compound that works well in a broad range of conditions and soil types. The offset shoulder knobs on the Storm Control can be so grippy, in fact, the tyre can oversteer across extreme off-camber, or ruts.

During testing, we punctured the casing a couple of times, so it's clearly more at home in the less pointy parts of the UK. Further to this terrain-specific trait, the lightweight carcass and skinny sidewalls need to be inflated hard to remain stable, which isn't an issue for proper slop and muddy off-cambers on dirt, but it can feel harsh on rougher terrain.

At £30, the Storm is fantastic value, and a great option for taming those unintentional drifts through the winter.



WTB WARDEN

£55

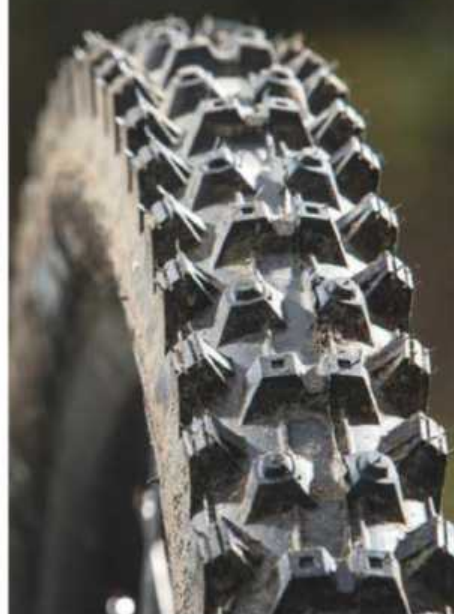
SPECIFICATION Weight: 1,160g • Size tested: 27.5x2.3in
• Contact: hotlines-uk.com

WTB's Warden is an unashamed enduro beast. Designed for hammering the nastiest Alpine-style tracks with minimal issues and maximum security, the flipside of which is a weight that reflects the toughness of the casing and the height of the fang-like knobs.

Despite the bulk, it's on the narrow side for a 2.3in. While this only encourages the Warden to slash through the deepest gunk and mud like a hot knife through butter, it does make the sidewalls bulge a fraction if you're running ultra-wide rims. The stiff blocks increase stability and slash the ground fiercely, meaning grip levels for cornering and braking are up there with the best on test.

WTB's thick, tough casing rides comfortably, and deforms nicely, despite the weight. But the spiky Warden can get a bit bouncy through rock gardens. Although this is the heaviest tyre on test, it's not ridiculously slow-rolling on firm ground.

The Warden is a very specific product, but if your aim is to tackle the sketchiest, slipperiest, steepest terrain at speed, it could prove a useful ally. The thick dual-ply WTB casing has already proven itself to last well in the Alps and the aggro tyre rolls a bit faster than the Michelin Wild Mud too — which is the only other product here with more outright grip.



Verdict

Winter tyres transform riding in the moist months, but need careful consideration if you're going to find the best tyre for your riding style and terrain. Whichever brand and size you choose, there's inevitably going to be a compromise between pure rolling speed and sheer grip in wet conditions.

Front-end security remains a priority in winter — a back-end slide is always much more manageable — and mixing and matching tyre brands, compounds and sizes at either end is the best way to balance rolling speed, weight and control. If you're a proper tweaker, you can always trim knobs down for custom grip levels.

For pure grip up front, the Michelin Wild Mud is ridiculously capable, but only ideal for riders with unadulterated descending priorities. We're totally sold on Schwalbe's more versatile Magic Mary tyre, since it can handle everything from dust to mud. It's not the fastest, and turnover is at the slow end of the scale, but the weight is manageable on the front, and combined with a faster rolling rear tyre, it should be just about acceptable for most trail riders.

Rear winter tyres face a difficult balancing act, since weight and rolling friction are far more noticeable out back, and rear tyres are also much more prone to damage and punctures, so require extra casing thickness and protection.

Hutchinson's Toro is a solid and durable option that rolls okay, but weighs the wrong side of a kilo. Maxxis' Shorty, and the Nobby Nic II are lighter and almost as tough, with the Shorty leaning way more to mud-specific, and the Nic boasting a broader remit and much faster rolling.

One factor we've not touched on so far is price, and on this front Specialized cleans up, being almost half the cost of the competition without compromising on quality — its XC-focused Storm Control is one of the best thinner, lighter models and the new, heavy-duty Hillbilly is a fantastic no-nonsense operator for anyone with a burly 29er in the shed.

	Continental Der Baron Projekt	Hutchinson DZO Enduro	Hutchinson Toro Enduro	Maxxis Beaver EXO	Maxxis Shorty	Michelin Wild Mud
Size tested	2.4in	2.25in	2.25in	2.0in	2.3in	2.25in
Price	£59.99	£49	£49	£37.99	£54.99	£56.99
Weight	990g	1,115g	1,020g	785g	830g	980g
Contact	conti-tyres.co.uk	spitfire-distribution.co.uk	spitfire-distribution.co.uk	extrauk.co.uk	extrauk.co.uk	hotlines-uk.com
Rating	8	7	8	8	9	9
	Onza Greina	Schwalbe Magic Mary	Schwalbe Nobby Nic II	Specialized Hillbilly	Specialized Storm Control	WTB Warden
Size tested	2.4in	2.35in	2.35in	2.3in	2.0in	2.3in
Price	£59.95	£49.99	£49.99	£35	£30	£55
Weight	1,070g	828g	750g	1,050g	650g	1,160g
Contact	silverfish.co.uk	schwalbe.co.uk	schwalbe.co.uk	specialized.com	specialized.com	hotlines-uk.com
Rating	8	10	8	9	9	8

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Front mudguards

If you want to ride fast along wet trails you'll need a front mudguard to keep your vision clear. Here are five of the best

Words: Paul Burwell Photos: Chris Catchpole

MUDHUGGER FRONT RACE

£23

SPECIFICATION Weight: 80g • Available in three sizes • Contact: themudhugger.co.uk

Mudhugger's new FR (Front Race) mudguard is slightly longer in the front than the standard Mudhugger model, so has greater protection at higher speeds. This is because the faster you go, the further mud gets thrown forward off the wheel, and you then ride into the spray.

It fastens to the lower fork legs and brace with zip-ties, and is compatible with both 27.5in and 29in wheels, although we found there's not a lot of clearance when running fatter winter tyres upwards of 2.25in. There are three slot positions, allowing you to rotate it forward on longer-travel forks.

These slots will also accommodate thin Velcro straps if you want to remove the guard after a ride to prevent it bending in the boot of your car.

The Mudhugger is slightly shorter than the Dfender, but it's lighter, half the price and for the majority of wet rides, just as effective.



POWA PRODUCTS DFENDER

£49

SPECIFICATION Weight: 139g • Fits Fox and RockShox forks • Contact: powa-products.com

The Dfender is the only mudguard that you can remove quickly from the fork, which stops it getting bent out of shape during transit. It has a machined clamp with vibration-reducing rubber bumpers and is held in place by a tiny thumb wheel. This replaces the old 4mm bolt, but there's still an 8mm nut in the bottom of the fender that can easily fall out. For this reason, we'd recommend taping or gluing it in place.

Currently the Dfender only fits Fox and RockShox forks, although we found it can work with other brands, it just depends on the shape of the fork brace. Spare clamps are available, but at £20 a pop it can get expensive if you've got more than one model of fork in your fleet.

Like the Mudhugger, the guard covers quite a large segment of the front tyre, providing excellent protection at all speeds. It's also well built, although that quality comes at a hefty price.



RRP ENDUROGUARD

£8.99

SPECIFICATION Weight: 24g • Available in two sizes and five colours • Contact: extrauk.co.uk

Rapid Racer Products' EnduroGuard is just one of many flexible polypropylene guards on the market. It bends to fit closely against the lower legs and brace and gets secured in place by zip-ties. The difference between the EnduroGuard and most other versions is it's available in two sizes, for 80-120mm and 130-200mm travel forks respectively. It also features Seal Guard Technology, which is basically a little extra tab of plastic that prevents mud and water from dousing your fork seals. The guard can also double as a shock protector, using the extra set of mounting holes.

The reason these plastic plates are so popular is they're cheap, light and effective. The EnduroGuard is shorter than all the others on test, but it still deals with medium-speed mud splatter. The best thing about this type of guard is its flexibility — you can bend it to release any built-up mud, and you can also stash your bike in the car without permanently bending the guard out of shape.



SPLASHBORED

£10

SPECIFICATION Weight: 56g • One sizes fit all • Contact: splashbored.com

Mudguards are rarely pretty, and of the ones we've seen, SplashBored is a whole new level of ugliness. But to be fair, it does get the job done. The company has combined two guards in one design — a front-facing guard and a shield type that sits between the fork crown and brace. The latter stops low-speed splatter thrown between the upper tubes and the front portion collects any muck that's flung forward at higher speeds.

We like the fact that the SplashBored doesn't bend if you lay the fork flat in the back of the car, but it does wobble like a nodding dog as you're riding along — granted, this is more annoying than anything. The front part is also too narrow, with noticeably more spray evading the guard when cranking the bike over, especially running fatter mud tyres.

With some extra width, and a more pleasing aesthetic, this could be a top product.



ZEFAL DEFLECTOR FM20

£11.99

SPECIFICATION Weight: 59g • One size fits all • Contact: chickencycles.co.uk

Developed in conjunction with the Zefal-sponsored Polygon Hutchinson UR enduro race team, the Deflector FM20 is a rigid resin fender with a three-point fixing. Velcro straps and zip-ties are included for attachment — the Velcro is useful if you want to remove the guard regularly, the latter offers a more permanent fixing. Soft Rilsan covers stop the sharp edges of the zip-ties scuffing the paint on your fork legs, and a nice sticker kit is included to make the guard look pretty.

The Deflector FM20 is compatible with all three wheels sizes and most forks. It has an extended front section, but we found it sits pretty low to the tyre on a 29er wheel, although the front section is quite flexible, so we never had any issues with clogging or it catching on the rotating tyre.

Overall the Deflector FM20 is affordable, lightweight and offers good all-round coverage.



£1,200 TRAIL HARDTAILS

Last year's Whyte 901 was in a class of its own but how does 2016's model compare to price-matched machines from Kona and Saracen?

Words: Alan Muldoon Photos: Roo Fowler, Dan Gould



TESTED
THIS
MONTH



KONA HONZO AL

£1,199



SARACEN MANTRA ELITE

£1,199.99



WHYTE 901

£1,199



Still out front? Can Whyte stay ahead of the competition

Hardtails are pretty simple, right? Most of them use a regular diamond frame design with a suspension fork up front, so is there really much point in spending more than a grand on one?

To answer that question, we've got three £1,200 hardtails on test this month: the Kona Honzo AL, Saracen Mantra Elite and the Whyte 901. And for our extra £200 we'll be looking for a step up in terms of performance and handling, not just better parts.

Whyte has proved time and time again that the 901 is the best trail hardtail on the market, but 2016 is a new model year, so the slate gets wiped clean. Still, given Whyte's pedigree, it's very much up to Kona and Saracen to knock it off that coveted top spot, as Whyte certainly won't be giving anything away to the competition.

All three bikes sport aluminium frames, and the reason for that is twofold. First and foremost, aluminium frames are cheaper to produce than steel ones, but they are also much lighter. In fact, reduced weight is the most easily quantified advantage of spending a little more on a hardtail — even if most of the weight savings come from the higher-level components.

With the advent of Plus-size tyres, wheel size is back on the agenda, and while there are no Plus-size bikes in

this test, there is a healthy mix: Saracen and Whyte both have 27.5in wheels while the Kona rolls on 29in hoops. If you want to learn more about the pros and cons of the new Plus wheel size, be sure to check out last month's Plus wheel size bike test.

Where each brand positions its bike in the market, and at whom it targets it, may also affect the outcome of this test. The Kona Honzo AL and Whyte 901 are both entry-level bikes in their respective ranges, whereas the Saracen Mantra Elite is the flagship model in the line. As such, it shares the same frame and geometry with its £500 sibling.

One thing's for sure, though, all three bikes will need to bring something extra to the table if they are going to better the best bikes in the £1,000 category of our Hardtail of the Year test.

Saracen and Whyte both have 27.5in wheels while the Kona rolls on 29in hoops

WHERE AND HOW

Tale of the test

We didn't simply want to know how our three £1,200 hardtails compared to each other; we also wanted to see if any of them were better than the £1,000 bikes in this year's Hardtail of the Year test. To do that, we tested them on exactly the same trails, and even though there's almost eight months separating both tests, the trail conditions were almost identical.

Dry, hard-packed trails kept speeds eye-wateringly fast, and this definitely helped highlight any shortcomings in handling as well as how forgiving, or unforgiving, each bike was. After several back-to-back rides with the bikes in stock trim, we fitted Maxxis Ardent tyres to all three, which allowed us to eliminate one of the biggest variables in performance and comfort.



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KONA HONZO AL

£1,199

SPECIFICATION

Frame Kona 6061 aluminium
Fork RockShox Sektor Silver TK, 120mm travel
Wheels Shimano/Novatech hubs, WTB SX25 rims, tyres Maxxis Tomahawk 29x2.3in
Drivetrain Race Face Ride chainset, Shimano Deore shifter and r-mech
Brakes Shimano Acera, 180/160mm
Components Kona XC/BC 760mm riser bar, 60mm stem and Kona seatpost
Sizes S, M, L, XL
Weight 13.25kg (29.2lb)
Contact konaworld.com

GEOMETRY

Size tested L
Head angle 67.2°
Seat angle 71.8°
BB height 307mm
Chainstay 412mm
Front centre 745mm
Wheelbase 1,157mm
Down tube 740mm
Top tube 631mm
Reach 460mm

There are two models in Kona's Honzo range: the AL version, tested here, and the more expensive Deluxe (DL) option that comes with a Fox 34 fork and a lighter build kit.

Both bikes share the same sleek alloy frame, with its smooth welds, low-slung top tube and contemporary geometry, but the DL build is 2kg lighter.

What sets the Honzo apart from other 29er trail hardtails is its incredibly short 412mm rear end. Kona has achieved this by slamming the rear wheel right up against the curved seat tube and ditching the facility to fit a front mech altogether. It's a really clean design, where the chainstays are anchored to the outer edges of the PF92 BB shell for maximum tyre clearance.

Curving the seat tube forward, to provide the necessary clearance for the rear wheel, has meant that the seatpost is more vertical and you sit almost directly on top of it. This provides a great seated position for keeping your weight forward on the climbs — especially with those incredibly short chainstays — but it also means that the post flexes less and you feel every bump coming straight up through the saddle. As such, the Kona does not offer as comfortable a ride as the Whyte.

SUSPENSION

The RockShox Sektor fork on the Honzo gets a tapered steerer tube and 15mm Maxle lowers for improved stiffness and extra steering precision. It's not as high-spec as the Sektor on the Whyte, though, as it gets heavier steel upper tubes instead of alloy ones.

Other than the increase in weight, there's little to separate the performance of both

forks. The set-up procedure was similar too: add extra air to increase support, then run the rebound towards the open end of the adjustment range to stop the fork packing down on repeated hits. There's here and tortoise markings above the rebound adjuster, so it's easy to work out which way you need to turn the dial.

COMPONENTS

With a 760mm-wide handlebar and 60mm stem, the Kona Honzo is ready to rock. Kona's in-house saddle feels a lot like a WTB Volt, in that it scoops up at the back and helps keep your weight forward when seated climbing. Not that you'll be able to sit down and spin up steeper grades with the 32/36 gearing. Given that we've struggled on lighter 29ers with a 32/42 set-up, Kona really needs to fit a smaller chainring, or a hop-up cog on the rear, for the 1x10 drivetrain to work for riders of average fitness — which, let's face it, is most of us.

We've criticised Kona in the past for spec'ing heavier, steel-bead tyres to save money, and unfortunately the Honzo is no different. The result of the increased rotational weight is that the Honzo is slower out of the blocks, but it also makes swapping between turns more labourous.

PERFORMANCE

There's a lot of misinformation floating around about 29ers, and the media and bike industry are jointly responsible. Unfounded claims, for example, that 29ers aren't as much fun as smaller-wheel bikes. Well, the Kona Honzo lays that one to rest. Then there's the idea that 29ers are harder to jump, even though they actually feel more

stable and safer in the air. Sure, they are never going to 360 or backflip as easily a bike with small wheels, but that's not what most trail riders are interested in, or capable of, anyway.

Another negative directed squarely at 29ers is that they are harder to manual. This isn't true either. Yes, it's harder to get the front up on a 29er, even on the Honzo, with its super-short 412mm chainstays, but after that initial pull, it's often easier to keep it up. And does it really matter? The last time we looked, most riders aren't shredding the trails on their rear wheels anyway. But almost everyone would benefit from the extra confidence and traction that a good 29er like the Kona Honzo AL provides.

VERDICT

Kona has done a truly amazing job on the Honzo AL. Not only does the frame look incredible, its modern take on 29er geometry ensures that the Honzo is one of most fun and engaging hardtails we've tested.

There are a few issues with the build kit that prevent the Honzo from reach its full potential, though. The heavier, steel-bead tyres literally drag the side down, and the 1x10 transmission offers too restrictive a gear range for all but the super-fit. Thankfully, both of these gripes are relatively easy to fix, but Kona has to be at the very top of its game to beat the mighty Whyte 901.

9



HIGHS

Great geometry and handling

LOWS

No seatpost QR and steel bead tyres



The Honzo screams out for a seatpost QR



142x12mm dropouts boost stiffness at the rear



Steel-bead tyres add an unacceptable amount of weight

BIKE TEST

Shimano's low-profile SLX rear mech is less prone to snagging on rocks and stumps

Triple-butt alloy tubing is used in the front triangle to save weight and improve ride quality

The relatively narrow 720mm handlebar makes the 19in frame feel more cramped and reduces steering control

Shimano Deore brakes have tons of stopping power with a light, smooth lever feel

SARACEN MANTRA ELITE

£1,199.99

SPECIFICATION

Frame Triple-butt aluminium
Fork SR Suntour Axon RL, 120mm travel
Wheels Sealed Bearing hubs, Kore XCD rims, Maxxis Ardent/Crossmark 27.5x2.25/2.1in tyres
Drivetrain Shimano Deore chainset and 2x10 shifters, SLX mechs
Brakes Shimano Deore, 180/160mm
Components Saracen, Kore saddle
Sizes 15, 17, 19, 21in
Weight 12.1kg (26.7lb)
Contact saracen.co.uk

GEOMETRY

Size tested 19in
Head angle 68.3°
Seat angle 72°
BB height 321mm
Chainstay 423mm
Front centre 710mm
Wheelbase 1,133mm
Down tube 690mm
Top tube 625mm
Reach 442mm

The Saracen Mantra has always fared well in our Hardtail of the Year test. Now it's time to see if the top-end Elite version can raise the bar even higher.

As is customary with most models, the Mantra Elite shares the same frame as the entry-level versions and it's the higher-level component spec that accounts for the step up in performance and weight reduction. How dramatic a weight saving does more than doubling the price make? Well, the entry-level Mantra that we tested back in June tipped the scales at 14.2kg; the Elite build here is more than 2kg lighter. That's a whopping saving and it makes the Mantra the lightest bike in this test.

But before we zero in on the components, let's look at the Mantra frame. Up front, Saracen uses a straight, XX44 head tube rather than a tapered design. It's oversized so you still reap all the stiffness gains, the only difference being that the lower headset bearing sits proud of the head tube to accommodate the tapered fork steerer.

At the opposite end of the bike, Saracen has added interchangeable Chip-Slot dropouts, where the Mantra Elite gets Saracen's open 142x12mm design. Why not use regular, closed 142x12mm dropouts like those found on the Kona? According to Saracen, the open design offers most of the stiffness benefits but you can still drop the wheel out like a regular QR. In practice, we found it trickier to use and it definitely wasn't any faster than a stock 142x12mm set-up.

SUSPENSION

When setting up the Suntour Axon fork, we detected a faint top-out knock that raised

concerns about how it would perform out on the trail. Fortunately, we didn't notice it while riding. In fact, the 120mm travel air-sprung unit surprised us with the amount of support it offered, and combined with its smooth, plush action, it easily ironed out the rough stuff. Our only real complaints were that it didn't feel as stiff as the RockShox Sektor on the Whyte, and that the 15mm Q-Loc quick-release was anything but quick to operate. On one occasion, it took us almost five minutes to remove the front wheel, as the QR kept snagging on the hub internals.

COMPONENTS

One area where the Saracen sits head and shoulders above the Kona and Whyte is the speed with which the rear hub engages. And while this may sound trivial, it's a big deal when the rear wheel spends almost as much time in the air as it does on the ground.

The contact points on the Saracen aren't so slick, however. Also there's a serious lack of padding in the Kore saddle, which means you feel every little ripple in the trail. Comfort isn't helped by the narrow 2.1in rear tyre. Yes, the Maxxis Crossmark is still one of the best choices for trail centres, but the bigger volume version would provide some much-needed extra cushioning.

PERFORMANCE

From the very first ride it was evident that the Saracen had more of an old-school feel to it than the Kona and Whyte. It sports an arse-up, head-down riding position, and for the most part this is due to the bottom bracket being almost 20mm higher than the Whyte's BB.

The frame shape looks slightly dated, due to the flatter top tube, and it also eats into standover clearance as a result. And it's not just your family jewels that can smash into it; spin the bars around in a crash, and the shifter pods wallop it too. Not so good, especially given the top quality thin-wall alloy frame construction.

The chain-slap against the unprotected chainstay is more of a pressing issue though. Not only is it deafening, but after a couple of rides the stay had more pockmarks than a teenager with acne. Factor in the cables rubbing on the fork crown and pinging off the frame, and it's all too easy to get distracted from the job at hand on the Mantra.

VERDICT

The Saracen Mantra has always put up a good fight in the lower price point tests, but the Elite version struggled in the presence of stiffer competition.

So even though it's the lightest bike here, and there's no disputing the quality of the frame construction, the shape and attitude of the Mantra felt distinctly dated next to the thoroughly modern offerings from Kona and Whyte.

It wouldn't take much, however, to bring the Mantra up to speed. With a lower BB, a more sloping top tube, and better contact points, the Mantra Elite could easily be back in the game.



HIGHS

Lightweight build with a snappy ride quality

LOWS

Frame shape and sizing are a little dated

Open dropouts boast QR convenience with bolt-thru stiffness

XX 44 head tube leads out a classy frame

Shaken to the Kore, the harsh saddle doesn't help ride comfort



Genuinely long, low and slack. Whyte has nailed the numbers on the 901

Short stems combine with longer top tubes for a joined up approach to sizing

A Maxxis Ardent up front gives you the confidence to lean into turns while the lower-profile Ardent Race on the rear reduces rolling resistance

SRAM's 2x10 drivetrain offers a wide gearing range, while the clutch rear mech helps keep the chain on

WHYTE 901

£1,199

SPECIFICATION

Frame 6061-T6 aluminium
Fork RockShox Sektor Gold RL, 130mm travel
Wheels Whyte hubs, Whyte Trail rims, Maxxis Ardent/Ardent Race 27.5x2.25/2.2in tyres
Drivetrain SRAM S1000 chainset, SRAM GX r-mech and f-mech, X5 shifters
Brakes Avid DB3, 180/160mm
Components Whyte
Sizes S, M, L, XL
Weight 12.6kg (27.7lb)
Contact whyte.bike

GEOMETRY

Size tested M
Head angle 66.9°
Seat angle 72.4°
BB height 302mm
Chainstay 424mm
Front centre 729mm
Wheelbase 1,153mm
Down tube 715mm
Top tube 638mm
Reach 447mm

This bike really needs no introduction. It's the trail hardtail against which all others are measured, and for 2016 British brand Whyte has tweaked the winning formula to make it even better.

Thankfully, it's not a wholesale change, and in keeping with other bikes in the Whyte range the frame length has simply crept up by 20mm on all four frame sizes. Which means this year's size medium is the same length as last year's large.

All of the other vital stats that make the 901 such a great bike remain unchanged. It's still slack and super-low, which is just how we like it. One small tweak that doesn't affect that handling, but is an improvement nonetheless, is that the seat tubes have been made shorter to better accommodate dropper posts with more drop.

One big advantage of having such a low-slung frame is that it's super-easy to move the bike around unimpeded, making it lithe and nimble through the techie stuff. It also means that we are running close to maximum seatpost extension on the size M for seated climbing. A set-up which offers the maximum amount of flex and comfort from the seatpost. This simply wouldn't have been possible if the size M frame didn't have ample length in the top tube. And with two frame sizes bigger than the one we tested, there's plenty of headroom for riders who are taller than 5ft 11in.

SUSPENSION

If you wanted to, you could quite easily fit a longer travel fork to the 901, but we think that would mess up the handling by creating big swings in the geometry as the fork compresses. Also, 130mm doesn't

over-stretch the Sektor's chassis, so it's still plenty stiff enough. We removed the air spring top cap, hoping to fit some Bottomless Tokens to lower the volume and allow us to add support without having to go too high on air pressure, but it didn't have the necessary thread. In the end we simply added 20psi over the recommended pressure printed on the back of the fork leg to help prop the front end up. It still retained good small bump sensitivity, so it wasn't actually a bad compromise. Also, running the rebound at the open end of the range allowed the fork to sit up higher in the travel.

COMPONENTS

The 901 doesn't come with a dropper post, but the quick release is so smooth that, with a little practice, it's possible to flick open the lever and drop your saddle on the hoof. Also, markings on the back of the post make it just as easy to get the saddle back up to your optimum high for pedalling. Whyte's in-house saddle has a nice flat profile, but more importantly, it's got ample padding, that's not overly soft, and this really aids comfort.

Because we were running the seatpost at full extension, we pushed the saddle all the way forward on the head of the seatpost, just so we weren't sat too far behind the BB on the climbs. With that in mind, it would probably be a good idea if the L and XL sizes came with inline posts.

PERFORMANCE

Every time we test the 901 we're blown away by how good it is. Everything about it feels right and it makes you want to ride flat-out from the get go. The latest version

is no different. It helps too that the 901 is very quiet, thanks to the clutch rear mech and rubberised chainstay protector.

We're also surprised that Whyte has had it all its own way for so long. After all, there's nothing magical or, more importantly, patentable, about what Whyte has done; the 901's geometry is printed here for all to see.

Given the stellar ride quality of the 901 we'd be very surprised if more manufacturers didn't follow Whyte's lead. But for now, the 901 very much remains the hardtail to beat. In fact, the only downside to the 901 having such good handling is that it can get you into trouble faster than you can get yourself out of it.

VERDICT

Every once in a while, a bike comes along that defines a category. The Whyte 901 is one such bike; it's the best trail hardtail bar none. What makes it so good? In a nutshell it's the geometry. With it's long, low-slung top tube, the reach feels perfect with the short 50mm stem that comes fitted as standard. The slack steering angle complements the short stem, and combined with the low BB height, the 901 feels sure-footed and confident in every situation. It's basically got the same angles and attitude as the best 140mm suspension bikes at sag, which means it can be ridden every bit as hard.





HIGHS

Attacking every trail

LOWS

Ankles and lower back take a beating



Simple but sexy: curvy seatstays offer decent tyre clearance

Internal cable routing is bang up to date



Smooth quick release almost negates the need for a dropper post

Conclusion

In the introduction to this test, we made it pretty clear that we were looking for a step up in performance over the £1,000 bikes in our Hardtail of the Year test.

The good news is that Whyte and Kona have certainly delivered on that front. Both bikes have better geometry and sizing than the best £1k bikes, and this translated to more control and confidence, allowing us to push harder and have more fun out on the trails. Well worth the additional £200, then.

In fact, the Whyte 901 is so capable and eager to charge that the only ways we could think of to make it even better would be to add rear suspension, or dare we say it... plus-size tyres. OK, 2.8in tyres probably wouldn't fit into the 901 frame, but there's easily enough clearance for 2.5in tyres, and the BB height is low enough that they wouldn't mess up the handling either.

While we're on the subject of wheel size, Kona has delivered an impressive 29er in the form of the Honzo AL. With its low BB, super-short chainstays and rangy front end, it's the hardtail equivalent of the excellent Process 111. It needs to go on a diet, though, as it is 0.75kg heavier than the Whyte. The best place to start shedding fat would be the rubber — by simply swapping the steel bead tyres for Kevlar ones, you'd instantly save over 0.25kg of rotating weight.

In the introduction, we also said that the positioning of each bike within its respective range could affect the outcome of the test. Saracen was obviously the odd one out here, as the Mantra Elite is the top-end bike in a four-strong range, while the Kona and Whyte are considered entry-level, albeit for more experienced riders. Still, we firmly believe that newcomers and experienced riders alike can benefit from the improved handling that comes with better geometry, and with a few tweaks the Mantra could easily clean up in every category from £500 all the way up to £1,200.

Why isn't this happening already? The sad truth is that, more often than not, cheaper bikes don't get as much love from the manufacturers as the expensive ones. There's no extra cost associated with better geometry, though, and absolutely no reason why £500 hardtails couldn't be the exact same shape as our test-winning Whyte 901. If they were, new riders would have more fun riding them, we'd have more fun testing them, and the world would be an altogether better place.

So, if there are any bike manufacturers reading this test who want to know how to make the humble hardtail better, Whyte has already done the hard yards, so just copy the 901.



RANGE FINDER

Other bikes to check out

CALIBRE BOSSNUT

£999

If £1,000 is your upper limit but you still want maximum fun, the Calibre Bossnut is all you'll need. With 130mm travel, sorted geometry and flawless build kit, it's easy to see why we voted it Bike of the Year 2015. gooutdoors.co.uk



WHYTE 905

£1,650

The price of the Whyte 905 has crept up by £50, but it's justified. Swapping the RockShox Revelation for the new Yari represents a massive boost in steering stiffness. Adding a SRAM 1x11 drivetrain keeps the weight down too. whyte.bike



SPECIFICATION

Vital statistics compared

Make/model	Kona Honzo AL	Saracen Mantra Elite	Whyte 901
Price	£1,199	£1,199.99	£1,199
Weight	13.25kg (29.2lb)	12.1kg (26.7lb)	12.6kg (27.7lb)
Contact	konaworld.com	saracen.co.uk	whyte.bike
FRAME			
Sizes	S, M, L, XL	15, 17, 19, 21in	S, M, L, XL
Size tested	L	19in	M
Frame material	6061 aluminium	Triple-buttressed aluminium	6061 aluminium
Suspension fork	RockShox Sektor Silver TK	SR Suntour Axon RL	RockShox Sektor Gold RL
Rear shock	N/A	N/A	N/A
Front travel	120mm	120mm	130mm
Rear travel	N/A	N/A	N/A
WHEELS			
Hubs	Shimano/Novatech 15/142mm	Sealed bearing 15/142mm	Whyte 15/135mm
Rims	WTB SX25 29in	Kore XCD 27.5in	Whyte Trail
Spokes	Stainless	Stainless	Stainless
Tyres	Maxxis Tomahawk 29x2.3in	Maxxis Ardent/Crossmark 27.5x2.25/2.1in	Maxxis Ardent/Ardent Race 27.5x2.25/2.2in
GROUPSET			
Shifters	Shimano Deore 1x10	Shimano Deore 2x10	SRAM X5
Front mech	N/A	Shimano SLX	SRAM GX
Rear mech	Shimano Deore	Shimano SLX	SRAM GX
Crank	RaceFace Ride 32T	Shimano Deore	SRAM S1000
Bottom bracket	RaceFace	Shimano	SRAM GXP
Brakes	Shimano Acera	Shimano Deore	Avid DB3
Rotor sizes	180/160mm	180/160mm	180/160mm
COMPONENTS			
Saddle	Kona Trail	Kore	Whyte
Seatpost	Kona XC/BC	Saracen	Whyte
Handlebar	Kona XC/BC 760mm	Saracen 720mm	Whyte 760mm
Stem	Kona XC/BC 60mm	Saracen 70mm	Whyte Gravity 50mm
Rating			

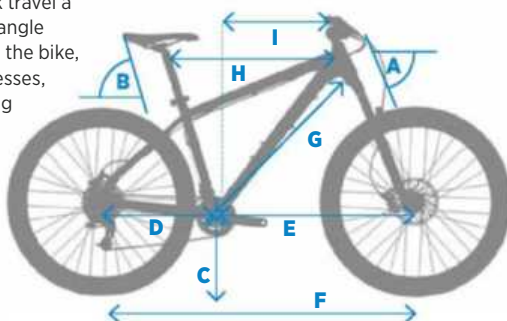
Whyte's 901 is as good as a hardtail can conceivably be

ANGLE FINDER

Geometry: what the numbers mean

Because hardtails only have front suspension, the biggest change in geometry when you load the bike is in the head angle, not the BB height (unlike a full-suspension bike). As such, the more fork travel a hardtail has, the slacker the static head angle needs to be. Otherwise, when you sit on the bike, or point it downhill, and the fork compresses, the head angle steepens and the steering gets too nervous. This is why the Whyte 901 has a relatively slack 66.9deg head angle.

The reduced variation in BB height compared to a full suspension bike is why it can also have a 303mm BB height without constantly clipping pedals on the ground.



	Kona	Saracen	Whyte
A Head angle	67.2°	68.3°	66.9°
B Seat angle	71.8°	72°	74.4°
C BB height	307mm	321mm	302mm
D Chainstay	412mm	423mm	424mm
E Front centre	745mm	710mm	729mm
F Wheelbase	1,157mm	1,133mm	1,153mm
G Down tube	740mm	690mm	715mm
H Top tube	631mm	625mm	638mm
I Reach	460mm	442mm	447mm

Afterimage

*Our favourite
people choose their
favourite photos*

AS CHOSEN BY...

**SAM REYNOLDS,
FREERIDER**



Who: Sam Reynolds
Where: Red Bull Rampage, Utah
When: October 2015
Photographer: Bartek Wolinski



Sam Reynolds ranks among the world's best freeriders. This year he won Best Trick at Red Bull Rampage for this insane Superman over the 70ft canyon gap. Look out for him riding his local trails around Hampshire and Surrey, as well as in worldwide competitions.

I chose this photo for several reasons, but first and foremost because it looks insane! It's cool for me to be able to look back and realise: 'wow, actually that was pretty crazy'.

Now I can look at it properly. When I was there on my bike, it was gnarly and really scary. It's a massive gap, but when you're at Rampage, everything is huge, so it almost seems normal. It's weird, actually: even the smallest, easiest line there is something I would never normally attempt, but it's Rampage so you just get on with it somehow.

The second reason is because I stood in exactly this position, where the photo was taken, when I first arrived with my

buddies. We said, "Wow, imagine how cool a Superman would look across there". And this photo is that moment of madness captured exactly how I dreamt it. Actually, it's probably even cooler, to be honest.

To win the Best Trick award makes this photo extra special to me, and a great way to remember an awesome week in the desert, slaving and digging in the heat, working towards this moment.

**Even the smallest, easiest line there
is something I would never normally
attempt, but it's Rampage so you
just get on with it somehow**



NOBODY PUTS CAMBER IN THE CORNER

Nothing should be defined by what it isn't. Not big enough, not small enough—whatever. The Camber is just fine where it is. It's the ultimate speed-loving trail bike, after all. So bring this magazine with you on your next ride—you're going to need some reading material while you're waiting for your buddies at the top and bottom of the trail this weekend. specialized.com/camber



THE TRUTH IS OUT THERE



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